Resilience of Nigerian Widows in the Face of Harmful Widowhood Practices in Southwest Nigeria: An Interdisciplinary Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Resilience of Nigerian Widows in the Face of Harmful Widowhood Practices in Southwest Nigeria: An Interdisciplinary Analysis

by

Esosa Mohammed

Widows in Nigeria endure adverse and traumatic practices that affect their health, well-being, and rights as women. After decades of struggle and resistance against persistent widowhood practices, this study sought to portray in Nigerian widows, hidden strengths, resilience, and agency rather than their vulnerability and powerlessness. Analysis of secondary scholarship, interviews, and survey questionnaires reveal that some Nigerian widows are able to cope even as they navigate through the challenges and trauma of demeaning and stressful practices. The results also demonstrate that the ability to cope and thrive under stress and adversity links not only to an individual’s personal growth and well-being, but also to their ability to develop agency and empower themselves. This study has implications for female empowerment and sociocultural change. Additionally, the results suggest a need for future research and interventions that further develop the concept of resilience in Nigerian widows.
I would like to give special thanks to all the members of my thesis committee for their constructive feedback, expertise, and patience throughout the writing process. I am indeed honored and grateful for your unrelenting support and insightful comments, not just with this project, but also during my time at ETSU as a graduate student. My thanks goes to the ETSU School of Graduate Studies for awarding me a research grant in the course of this study. Also, my gratitude goes to the Dean of Continuing Studies and Academic Outreach for giving me a job as a graduate assistant when I needed one. Thank you to all the wonderful women in the Liberal Studies department and for making me feel welcome from the first day. Special thanks also goes to the MALS writing consultant for her patient editing. I would like to use this opportunity to thank all the amazing women who agreed to be a part of this project and who spoke so bravely of their experiences and shared their personal stories of resilience and growth with me. Your contribution to the widowhood discourse in Nigeria is invaluable and serves as a stepping stone to create awareness of new ways to overcome trauma and adversity. A special thank you to my family for their loving support. Above all, I am thankful to God Almighty for sustaining and guiding me constantly.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF TABLES</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement of the Problem</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Rationale for the Study</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goals for the Study</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodology and Research Design</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structure</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resilience Theory and Concepts</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender Trauma and Resilience</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feminist Standpoint Theory</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phenomenology</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. LITERATURE REVIEW</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nigerian Women as Historical Actors Situated Within Patriarchal Settings</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Studies That Use Standpoint Theory</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widows as Potential Agents of Socio-Cultural Change Through Empowerment</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Rationale for Research Design</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interdisciplinarity</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selection of Participants</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualitative Interviews</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Survey Questionnaires</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethical Issues</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feminist Interviews</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Trauma-Informed Approach</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Phenomenological Interview</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrative Analysis</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Widows’ Socio-Demographic Characteristics</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Widowhood Practices in Nigeria</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Widows’ Opinions and Attitudes</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure                                                                                                                                         Page
1. Widowhood and Religion…………………………………………………………………………96
2. Widowhood and Level of Education………………………………………………………….96
3. Adverse Widowhood Practices………………………………………………………………..97
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

She stood in the storm, and when the wind did not blow her way, she adjusted her sails.

— Elizabeth Edwards, Resilience: The New Afterword

In this study, I explore issues of resilience and strength in Nigerian widows as they undergo trauma and stress, not only from the loss of their spouses but also from certain rites that characterize widowhood in Southwest Nigeria. Scholars such as Kate Young and Uche Ewelukwa maintain that these rites are largely harmful and detrimental to the rights and well-being of women, particularly those in developing countries such as Nigeria, Ghana, and India.\(^1\) Some of these practices include being made to sleep in the same room with the deceased’s corpse, to drink the water used to wash the deceased’s body, to have one’s hair shaved, and to confine her movement for a specific time. Depending on the social status of a widow, the intensity of these practices may vary, but ultimately they serve to oppress, re-traumatize, and discriminate against widows.

The imposition of adverse rites and rituals raises the question of how Nigerian widows cope with these practices and lays the foundation for this study. My research indicates some Nigerian widows are coping well and consequently I argue primarily that in spite of adverse and discriminatory cultural practices that Nigerian widows are subject to in many cases, they are able to rise above their challenges to rebuild and reconstruct their lives mainly through resilience. As

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widows are the focus of this research, I also argue that their narratives contribute to knowledge production and best provide invaluable insights into how they demonstrate resilience on a daily basis. According to Emily Crawford, Margaret Wright, and Ann Masten, the “study of resilience is a search for knowledge about the processes that could account for positive adaptation and development in the context of adversity and disadvantage.”

I adopted an interdisciplinary method of inquiry that combines critical insights from the fields of psychology and feminist studies to discover the coping mechanisms that enable Nigerian widows to persevere in settings of adversity and trauma.

In the last decade, more researchers are seeking to learn how individuals thrive and cope with adversity as it provides a useful theoretical framework to understand the ways in which people deal with challenges. As Nigerian widows steer their way through the varied contexts of gender and cultural norms in society, I used this study to understand the emergence of strength in Nigerian widows through the lens of resilience theory. Research on Nigerian widows’ resilient outcomes is an important area of investigation because it offers widows the ability to thrive in the midst of challenging circumstances as well as to think positively. However, the broader purpose of this thesis situates itself within the empowerment of Nigerian widows. One of the goals of this study was to acknowledge the small, yet powerful contribution that Nigerian widows make to sociocultural change as they become more resilient and demonstrate agency.

According to Curtis McMillen in “Better for it: How People Benefit from Adversity,” adopting a resilience model emphasizes the human potential as they face challenges in life.

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my research, resilience theory not only serves to highlight the strength and ability of Nigerian widows to cope with adverse cultural practices, but also illuminates their ability to conceive themselves as strong and capable of dealing with challenges as they arise. Furthermore, feminist standpoint theory revealed that Nigerian widows exercise agency in small but impactful ways in the face of adverse widowhood practices and stifling patriarchal structures in society. The results of this study show that as individuals continue to demonstrate resilience, they become more empowered and better able to exercise their individual and collective agency in society. Overall, the usefulness of this study is its potential for giving voice to Nigerian widows and empowering, not only the widows, but also Nigerian women in general because as Fredoline Anunobi insists, “women are crucial to the success of social development.”

Nigerian women can best bring about sociocultural change when they feel empowered and can exercise agency. I therefore argue that focusing on the resilience and strengths of Nigerian widows fundamentally links to female empowerment and provides a key for women in Nigeria to gain agency. In addition, demonstrating resilience also helps to improve their sociocultural status, and in doing so, begin to invoke change.

Simply put, resilience is the capacity to overcome trauma and stress. The term resilience originates from the Latin word “resilire” which means to return to a prior position. Resilience is the ability to get back on one’s feet after facing misfortune or change. Over time, scholars have offered several definitions of resilience across contexts; Chapter 2 presents a detailed analysis of scholars work on the topic of resilience. Suffice it to say, the fundamental basis of resilience is

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the ability of an individual, group, or community to bounce back from circumstances that induce stress or trauma.

In this study, I adopt a trauma-informed approach as a foundation for analyzing the resilience of widows. Although the term trauma can apply to different contexts, this study’s primary concern is the type of trauma that Nigerian widows experience concurrently by being both widows and women. In *Writing Trauma, Writing History*, Dominick LaCapra, a well-known researcher in trauma studies, refers to trauma as “a disruptive experience that disarticulates the self and creates a hole in existence.” In other words, the individual becomes destabilized and thrown into a state of confusion, causing her/him to feel uncoordinated or to lose focus. Individual trauma may result from an event or a series of events that can be physically, emotionally harmful, life-threatening, and can affect the individual mentally, physically, socially, emotionally, or spiritually. Trauma manifests itself in the lives of Nigerian widows, because during the grieving process, these women deal with accusations of witchcraft. In some cases, a widow faces the threat of either marrying her brother-in-law, losing her children, or denied access to her spouses’ property. Some researchers refer to this type of trauma that widows, and indeed women in general undergo as “gender trauma” mainly because it occurs as a result of oppressive patriarchal structures and sociocultural practices.

Although Stephanie Covington maintains that “trauma can skew a woman’s relational experiences and hinder her psychological development,” research shows that through resilience,

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individuals can recover from trauma and go on to live happy, fulfilled lives. My analysis of
gender trauma in Chapter 2 draws from the theoretical studies of scholars such as George
Bonanno, Dominick LaCapra, Sylvia Tamale, Richard Tedeschi, Lawrence Calhoun, and Meera

Despite an extensive literature on widowhood in Nigeria, a preliminary review of articles
reveals that for the most part, interventions and inquiries have focused mainly on examining the
plight and predicament of widows. Certainly, this approach has served to create a much-needed
awareness nationally and even globally of what some Nigerian women go through after they lose
their spouses.\footnote{Although June 23 was established by the Loomba Foundation as a day set aside to recognize widows, in 2010, the United Nations officially recognized this day and has in fact continuously decried the degrading and life-threatening mourning rites and other forms of widowhood abuse. Also see the U.N article on widows titled “Invisible Women, Invisible Problems,” December 2001, \url{http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/public/wom_Dec%2001%20single%20pg.pdf} (accessed August 8, 2018).} It has also served to identify some of the practices women are expected to
comply with as well as the rationale that individuals adduce for subjecting widows to adverse
practices. By and large, however, these efforts emphasize the vulnerability and powerlessness of
widows by focusing on the negative effects of widowhood practices, rather than on the ways
widows can learn to cope with these persistent practices and begin to exercise agency and
improve their sociocultural status. There is thus a research gap in the knowledge of ways in
which Nigerian widows cope with the social, cultural, economic, and emotional burden of
widowhood practices.
Consequently, in this study, I advocate for a shift from viewing widows as hapless victims to perceiving them as persons who can develop resiliency born of adversity. What then are the coping mechanisms or protective factors that Nigerian widows employ to enable them to bear the hardship of widowhood practices? It is the answer to this question that concerns me. A statement made by Steven Southwick best mirrors my interest in investigating coping mechanisms of Nigerian widows:

> In addition to focusing on what goes wrong with people who become chronically symptomatic and function poorly after adversity, we have begun to ask about what goes right in people who negotiate potentially traumatic events with equanimity. What are the natural mechanisms that allow most people to cope successfully with adversity? What are they doing and how are they coping?12

Although in the last decade, a few Nigerian scholars such as Betty-Ruth Iruloh, Williams Elsie, and Falana Akinlabi have begun to focus on widows’ coping mechanisms, there remains limited research on the theme of resilience in the lived experience of Nigerian widows.13 Consequently, I address the current research gap by exploring the following topics:

- Emphasizing strength, resilience, and female agency in Nigerian widows rather than vulnerability and powerlessness.
- Exploring resilience in Nigerian widows within the broader context of sociocultural change through female empowerment.

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Acknowledging the trauma that widows undergo by losing their spouse and concurrently undergoing the hardship and stress of widowhood practices.

Prioritizing widows’ voices in a way that makes visible their private, everyday life experiences and at the same time offers different perspectives on how they have dealt with stress and trauma.

Through the lens of feminist standpoint theory, I maintain that the narratives of Nigerian widows, a marginalized group of women subject to unequal power relations both in their homes and within society serves as a unique source of knowledge for researchers. Mary Swignoski defines a standpoint as a “position in society, involving a level of awareness about an individual’s social location, from which certain features of reality come into prominence and still others are obscured.” Through this study, the standpoint of twelve Nigerian widows offers critical insights into the private lives of some Nigerian widows, their experiences, and perceptions that often lay hidden and unseen.

Statement of the Problem

The practice of harmful widowhood rites and rituals is one of the complex problems that women, not only in Nigeria, but also in some other developing countries, contend with at present. Depending on the social status of a widow at the time of her husband’s death, a newly-widowed woman may become economically vulnerable and suffer undue hardship. Where this is the case, widows cannot provide for themselves and their children and their quality of life rapidly deteriorates. Huma Ahmed-Ghosh states that in India, a nation that has reached a high level of economic modernization, and whose legislation has passed new laws that favors widows, “poverty and cultural institutions continue to dominate the discourse and reality of widows.”

lives.” Similarly, drawing on qualitative data from a life history study on ten widows in South Africa, Thatshisiwe Ndlovu reports that widows undergo dehumanizing mourning and burial rites in the name of culture and tradition. Likewise, in Nigeria, widows are subject to certain rituals in accordance with the custom of the ethnic group that her husband identifies with. For example, in Nigeria, an Ibo widow must shave her hair and sit on the floor all day, while Yoruba widows cannot receive visitors or leave the house for a certain time.

As research shows, these practices are usually enforced by the widow’s in-laws and clans people, mostly the women folk whose actions are supported by their husbands, brothers, and uncles. That women suffer the most oppression within their family has been highlighted by scholars such as Martha Nussbaum, who states that the “family unit has been one of, if not the, major sites of the oppression of women.” Although the World Family Organization describes the family as the basic structure of society, Patricia Hill Collins maintains that rather than “projecting a model of equality,” the family unit often serves as a tool to violate and discriminate against women. The result of discrimination against women within their families includes adverse practices imposed on them by their in-laws, and this leads one to query the idea of “family” as a site of love, security, and care.

Even though scholars such as Iheanacho and Uchechukwu Ewelukwa describe these practices as “horrendous,” “bizarre,” and “degrading,” others like George Tasie maintain that society creates widowhood rites to protect women from the vengeful spirit of their deceased husbands. Research suggests that the issue of widowhood practices in Nigeria is not merely a problem of widows’ performing derogatory rites, losing their homes, or not being able to make ends meet after the loss of their husbands. Rather, it is the outcome of the age-old African and indeed global belief that men are superior to women. Today, the Nigerian woman’s unequal and marginalized status is greatly emphasized because it has become deeply embedded and enshrined in almost all aspects of society, such as religion, politics, and social groups, so much so that women in Nigeria have to contend with the ugly head of patriarchy, which invariably operates to favor men over women.

According to Allan Johnson, a sociologist and gender studies researcher, a patriarchal society is one that accords special privileges to men and endorses male domination. For example, Nigerian men are not expected to carry out cultural practices such as shaving their hair nor are they required to confine themselves for a period of time when they lose their wives, leading Gbenga Afolayan and Ebenezer Durojaye to insist that these rituals are inherently gendered. Nigerian widowers are encouraged to remarry within a short time to “stabilize their

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social condition,” but society frowns on widows who marry within two years of their husbands’ death.\textsuperscript{23} As Catherine Oluyemo and Tolulope Ola put it, patriarchy accords certain privileges to men and this often results in an unjust system against women.\textsuperscript{24} Even in death, patriarchy insists on honoring the deceased man by subjecting his widow to derogatory practices; therefore, I contend here that gender inequality serves as a foundation for the infliction of adverse widowhood practices.

In “Traditional Religion and Socio-Anthropological Factors Sustaining Widowhood Configurations of Violence on Nigerian Women,” Iheanacho observes succinctly that the institution of widowhood has “continued to resist extinction strategies.”\textsuperscript{25} In addition to a large body of scholarship on widowhood that outright condemns these practices as violating, dehumanizing, and unfair, some global and national efforts advocate either abolishing or diminishing adverse widowhood practices. For example, the Enugu State enactment of the 2005 Law aims to guarantee human rights and prohibit harmful widowhood practices.\textsuperscript{26} Furthermore, in their efforts to draw global attention to the phenomena of widowhood practices in Nigeria, the United Nations declared June 23 as International Widows’ Day.\textsuperscript{27} Sylvia Tamale echoes

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 29-30.
\textsuperscript{26} The Malpractices Against Widows and Widowers (Prohibition) Law of Anambra State 2005 provides that no person for whatever purpose or reason should compel a widow/widower to, remain in confinement, vacate the matrimonial home or sleep in the same room with corpse of the husband. Please see the “The Nigeria CEDAW Ngo Coalition Shadow Report,” June 30-July 18, 2018: 6, https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/BAOBABNigeria41.pdf (accessed October 9, 2018).
\textsuperscript{27} Another initiative is the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).
Iheanacho’s point when she declares that gender inequality persists notwithstanding all the scholarship that consistently highlights its drawbacks. After decades of struggle and resistance against widowhood practices and indeed gender inequality in Nigeria, I advocate for the need to focus on how widows can learn to overcome hardship in the interest of their overall wellbeing. This research is relevant because women are a central part of the social dynamics in every nation and they contribute significantly to the progress of humanity as a whole. According to Iheanacho, “the advancement of women is the advancement of humanity.” Widowhood practices not only threaten women’s rights, health, and wellbeing; these practices also invariably affect future generations. This study is therefore significant for a number of reasons:

1. It advocates for the deconstruction of an outdated and oppressive cultural practice that serves to place women at a disadvantage in society.
2. It contextualizes and contributes to the scholarship on widowhood by investigating how widows are able to cope with challenges and hardship through resilience and strength.
3. It presents the diverse and yet common voices of women who refuse to be labeled as victims, and instead portrays their strength, fortitude, and agency.

The Rationale for the Study

Both my personal experience and intellectual interest laid the foundation for this study on widowhood and the far-reaching effects these practices have had on women in Nigeria. As Wendy Sharer notes, our lived experiences often help us recognize what is significant. The unexpected loss of my husband in 2015 was devastating and traumatic for me, and three years after, the loss is still very tangible. For me, widowhood has been an unfamiliar and frightening

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28 “Gender Trauma in Africa: Enhancing Women's Links to Resources,” 18; Durojaiye, “Woman, but Not Human,” 19.
30 Young, “Widows without Rights,” 203.
territory, full of emotional upheaval, grief, loneliness, and trauma. During this challenging period of my life, I have been drawn to other women, both newly widowed and otherwise, and these women have shared their widowhood stories with me, thereby placing me firmly within the widowhood discourse. Some widows spoke of in-laws who dispassionately disposed them of their late husband’s property and left them with nothing, while others described oppressive and abusive practices such as sleeping in the same room with the deceased and compulsory confinement. My research interest developed not only from their stories of ill-treatment, wrongful disinheretance, and the injustices that they face and continue to face, but particularly from their stories of endurance, strength, and resilience in the face of trauma, adversity, and hardship. Stemming from this, I intend to use my role and perspective as a Nigerian widow to create a platform from which I can contribute to the research on resilience and in doing so, understand the coping mechanisms they rely on to survive. Although I have a personal concern in my research by being a widow, my intellectual interest also laid the foundation for this exploratory study.

Sharlene Hesse-Biber, a researcher of feminist pedagogy and methodology, defines reflexivity as the process through which researchers becomes aware of and interrogates their positions throughout the research process. As a researcher, I was aware that my position as a Nigerian widow, who likely shares a similar standpoint with many other Nigerian widows might have affected my ability to present the information in this research in an unbiased and impartial manner. I was also aware that my personal views and opinions might have had an impact on my arguments and conclusions, particularly concerning the structures that serve to enhance adverse

widowhood practices in Nigerian society. In other to ensure strong objectivity, feminist scholars such as Nancy Naples and Barbara Gurr insist on a self-reflective approach to theorizing and shaping the production of knowledge “rather than the individualistic, top-down, and distanced approach that typifies the traditional scientific method.” Consequently, to enable me to present as objective and unbiased a study as possible, I assumed a self-reflective stance towards my interpretations, assumptions, and conclusions as I embarked on this academic process.

Although I am a widow, I was aware that this did not place me in a position to speak on behalf of other Nigerian widows, nor did I think I was in a position to represent them as a whole. I cannot say I understand entirely what Nigerian widows go through or how they cope because every widow experiences widowhood differently. As the results of the interviews I conducted in Chapter 5 reveals, a widow’s experience intersects with her social status, class, age, ethnic group, and religion. In this study, the widows spoke for themselves and described first-hand their diverse social, cultural, and economic realities. The widows also described how they demonstrate resilience and at the same time deal with trauma and stress. My modus operandi was to strive to balance my subjectivity by being ethically responsible in presenting my research and findings.

Keeping this in mind, I ensured I was mindful of the widows who formed the basis of this study and who willingly agreed to share their personal journeys of widowhood and stories of resilience. Some of the questions I continuously considered as I conducted this research were how my being a Nigerian widow affected my research process: Could I be sensitive to the widows’ traumatic experience and at the same time ensure that my personal experience of loss

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and trauma did not affect the way I interviewed the widows? How would my bias as a widow affect my results and subsequent analysis? How would I balance my research agenda with critical but unexpected themes that could emerge from the widows’ narratives?

Goals for the Study

Throughout this research, my primary goal was to expand as well as advance the literature on widows’ resilience in Nigeria, and by doing so, contribute to valuable scholarship on widowhood. By adopting a trauma-informed approach, I sought to add to the growing body of theoretical and empirical scholarship on resilience and gender trauma in Nigerian widows as well as widows in other developing countries where similar practices exist. Ultimately, it is my hope that this study will serve as a framework for future research in Nigeria and other developing countries. In other to address this primary goal, I documented and analyzed the lived experience of some Nigerian widows to discover what factors enable them to cope with the trauma, stress, and adversity of harmful and detrimental widowhood practices.

My second goal was to undertake a qualitative analysis to ascertain whether or not a widow’s social background bears on the way she experiences widowhood as well as on her ability to demonstrate resilience. Here, I analyzed issues such as educational level, age, ethnic group, and religious status with the aim of discovering the extent to which one’s social background plays a role in her ability to cope with adversity. In addition, I also analyzed the degree to which a widow’s response to trauma intersects with her ethnicity, age, level of education, and religion. The third and last goal was to synthesize the data and insights derived from this research and use them to analyze the implication of the findings both for improving the well-being and health of widowed women in Nigeria and harnessing their potential for female agency and empowerment.
Methodology and Research Design

In my search to discover and understand the roots of resilience in Nigerian women as well as to learn about the effects of trauma on them, I have chosen a mixed method using both qualitative (interviews) and quantitative (surveys) approaches. In order to conduct interviews and survey questionnaires for this research, I first obtained formal approval from the East Tennessee State University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB is a committee established to review research. Their main purpose is protecting the rights and safety of individuals who agree to take part in research that are under the authority of the IRB. Also, in my research, I drew on the works and analysis of several scholars such as Amina Mama Michael Ungar, Sylvia Tamale, Ngozi Iheanacho, Sandra Harding, and Ayodele Johnson to analyze my key questions. Overall, the research design for this study was led by a feminist approach that privileges the lived experience of study subjects and therein provides tangible insights for this study.

Structure

Chapter 2 discusses the theoretical frameworks that guide this study and set the tone for the interdisciplinarity of this research. I conduct a review of relevant literature on existing scholarship regarding the issue of widowhood practices in Nigeria. I also examine pertinent literature on resilience and standpoint theory in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 sets forth the research design and methods I employed to explore my research questions. Chapter 5 presents findings from twenty survey questionnaires and the narratives of twelve Nigerian widows. Here, I use both a resilience and a feminist perspective to analyze my findings. I also present the limitations.

34 The IRB approval is vital to both quantitative and qualitative research and qualitative or quantitative research cannot begin until their approval has been secured. IRB approval means the determination of the IRB that the research has been reviewed and may be conducted based on criteria including equitable selection of participants, risks to participants and documentation of informed consent. More information on the IRB processes and requirement can be found at https://www.etsu.edu/irb/resources.php (accessed May 4, 2018).
of the study and discuss the implications of the findings, with recommendations for future research. Chapter 6 presents research conclusions. One major conclusion was that contrary to popular belief, some Nigerian women experience adverse widowhood practices irrespective of their level of education, religion, age, or class. Another important conclusion based on the survey and interview results is that Nigerian widows demonstrate resilience and exercise agency even as they navigate through the challenges and trauma of demeaning and stressful rites and rituals.
CHAPTER 2

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

The role of a theoretical framework in guiding the research process cannot be overemphasized. Interdisciplinary researchers Allen Repko and Rick Szostak explain that the use of theory “drives the questions asked and the phenomenon under investigation.”\(^1\) Also, the authors point out that theory provides disciplinary insights into the research problem through its methods, assumptions, and perspectives.\(^2\) Therefore, in order to analyze and document the experience of Nigerian widows, and to investigate what factors enable them to cope and build resilience I approached this study from two major theoretical perspectives: resilience and feminist standpoint. On the one hand, resilience theory, grounded in social and behavioral psychology, guides the discussion on the topic of resilience, its concepts, major insights, and assumptions. On the other hand, standpoint theory is a feminist approach that also guides this study. The theoretical constructs of both resilience and standpoint theory provide insights that guides my research questions, design, and methodology. This study thus crosses disciplinary boundaries in a bid to construct new knowledge on Nigerian widows’ resilience.

Resilience Theory and Concepts

The study of resilience started about half a century ago and has expanded significantly over the past twenty years, gaining steady attention in various fields and disciplines including social work, psychology, education, child studies, and trauma studies. In “The Metatheory of Resilience and Resiliency,” Glenn Richardson notes the emergence of resilience as a theme that

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\(^1\) Interdisciplinary Research: Process and Theory (Los Angeles and London: SAGE, 2017), 60.
\(^2\) Ibid.
has increasingly become prevalent across academic disciplines and helping professions. There are several reasons for the growing popularity and interest in resilience theory. First, rather than adopting an approach that lays emphasis on the problems associated with widowhood practices, many social science researchers now focus more on discovering what factors enable individuals to thrive despite adversity. Second, given the complexity of present-day society, it is no wonder researchers are paying attention to resilience as a sustainable approach to understanding and possibly resolving social problems. Several studies show that a resilience-based approach to persistent social issues such as gender-based violence, rape, incest, and poverty may very well offer long-lasting solutions for overcoming their negative impacts. By focusing on resilience and adopting strength-based approaches, individuals, groups, communities, and even generations can learn how to function well and succeed in spite of adversity. Lastly, studies show that many individuals who undergo traumatic events - such as some Nigerian widows do - can overcome these experiences with appropriate support and intervention.

Scholars, scientists, and practitioners have studied and adapted the phenomenon of resilience to a wide range of circumstances and perspectives, each expanding the theory of resilience. Included, for example, are studies on the Holocaust (Nechama Tec), children (Emmy Werner, Ruth Smith), nursing (Teresa Stephens), the family (Froma Walsh), schizophrenia (Norman Garmezy), and indigenous women (Catherine Burnette). The prolific use of resilience

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4 Ibid., 313.
6 For articles on resilience, see Nechama Tec, *Resilience and Courage: Women, Men, and the Holocaust* (New
speaks to its value as a tool for nurturing strengths, as well as for enhancing one’s capacity to cope and do well in the face of adversity. Resilience studies is a dynamic field that evolves with each study, but the central concern of this theory is to discover the factors that imbue resilience in individuals. In her research, Margaret Wright theorizes that resilient women possess the following characteristics: “an active approach to solving life’s problems; an ability to perceive experiences constructively, even if these experiences have caused pain and suffering; an ability to gain other people’s positive attention and support; a network of supportive adults within or outside the family, and a strong reliance on faith to maintain a positive view of a meaningful life.”

Similarly, after decades of behavioral research, a group of professors at Harvard University discovered that “the combination of supportive relationships, adaptive skill-building, and positive experiences constitutes what is commonly called resilience.” This is not to say that resilient individuals do not struggle with stress or suffer trauma, but rather that the presence of one or more of these characteristics enables them to cope better with hardship. Furthermore, one or more of these characteristics determine how (and why) some people are able to cope while others are not.

The focus in this study is resilience in the face of stress, adversity, and gender trauma. Emmy Werner, an American psychologist and resilience theorist, was among the first scholars to...
investigate the phenomenon of resilience in stress and adversity. In 1955, Werner embarked on a longitudinal study on Kauai children who were exposed to trauma, chronic discord, and parental mental illness. Monitoring the development of these children from birth to midlife, Werner discovered that one out of three children succeeded against the odds and grew into confident and caring adults irrespective of the difficulties they faced as children. What then were the resilient qualities that helped them cope, despite growing up in an environment filled with stress and adversity? Some of the protective factors that Werner’s study revealed included religious beliefs and dependable adults or mentors. Werner’s findings and conclusions challenge the myth that children who face difficulties and hardships will invariably fail to succeed in the future.

Although several resilience researchers define resilience in diverse ways, the underlying concepts of vulnerability, adversity, and coping appear to remain constant. In this study, I rely on the theoretical assumptions of Michael Ungar’s socio-ecological concept of resilience. Ungar, a professor of social work and co-director of the Resilience Research Center in Canada defines resilience as a concept that re-orders an individual’s focus from the breakdown and disorder that is more commonly found in a stressful environment, “to the individual characteristics and social processes associated with either normal, or unexpectedly positive psychosocial development.”
To Ungar, resilience in the face of trauma is “less a reflection of the individual’s capacity,” as both social and cultural contexts also facilitates positive development. In other words, rather than giving in to despair or hopelessness in the face of stress, adversity and trauma, some individuals respond in positive ways, relying on both personal as well as environmental factors to sustain their well-being. Although some resilience scholars, notably Bonnie Bernard, maintain that “we are all born with an innate capacity for resilience by which we can develop social competence, problem-solving skills, a critical consciousness, autonomy, and a sense of purpose,” others insist that “recovery from trauma is not an individual capacity alone but a function of the individual’s social ecology to facilitate recovery and growth.”

Implicit in Ungar’s socio-ecological theory is the idea that resilience is not a stable trajectory or a predictive trait, but rather a dynamic process that enables individuals who experience stressful or traumatic events to demonstrate specific attributes that enable them to cope in the midst of their struggles. These qualities, according to Ungar, vary across cultures and contexts. For instance, resilient qualities may differ based on one’s ethnic group, race, social status, religious beliefs, and individual circumstances. In 2005, Ungar and his team of researchers carried out a mixed methods study on over 1500 youth in fourteen communities, on five continents to discover how they construct resilience, and findings from this study suggest that resilience is a multicultural construct. Eighty-nine interviews reveal that despite facing


Ungar, “Resilience, Trauma, Context, and Culture,” 258.

Ibid., 230.

similar hardships, their coping patterns vary across cultures.” Consequently, Ungar’s approach to understanding resilience as a collective process and not an individual one is based on his pluralistic view of the phenomenon of resilience and several resilience researchers echo this view.

Southwick, Bonanno, Masten, Panther-Brick, and Yehuda conceptualize the features of resilience as diverse and they include the genetic, the epigenetic, the developmental, the demographic, the cultural, the economic, and the social. This team of multidisciplinary researchers theorize that “after trauma occurs, focusing on one’s strength enhances resilience.”

The different sources of strength that individuals rely on to cope depends both on their social network and their personality traits. For instance, in their work, Lauren Sippel, Robert Pietrzak, Dennis Charney, Linda Mayes, and Steven Southwick note that, “the support individuals receive from family, friends, colleagues, organizations, and community has a profound impact on their psychological health, physical health, and ability to deal with adversities and challenges.”

With resilience theory comes the understanding that some people possess the capability to thrive in stressful circumstances depending on the coping resource available. In the case of widows’ maltreatment and hardship in Nigeria, resilience theory offers a basis upon which resilient qualities and characteristics can be identified and in turn, used to help widows learn how to cope under adversity. Rather than simply addressing the predicament of widows, or highlighting the negative effects of harmful widowhood practices, a resilience-based approach

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20 “Resilience Definitions, Theory, and Challenges, 11.
21 Ibid.
enables researchers and those in the helping professions to focus more on the processes through which the personal strengths and agency of widows can be nurtured and strengthened.

In a qualitative study designed to gain a clearer understanding of what conditions contribute to coping and resilience, psychological researchers Roberta Greene, Coleen Galambos, and Youjung Lee captured some of the emerging themes from their interview data to include personal attitude, spirituality/religion, education, and relationships with family and community members on different levels. According to Greene, Galambos, and Youjung, “resilience comprises both internal factors such as temperament and attitude, and external elements such as neighborhood or community well-being.” Other researchers have persisted in investigating and identifying the underlying factors that can promote resilient qualities, not only in individuals, but also in groups and communities. The American Psychological Association (APA) refers to Teresa LaFromboise’s work, which maintains that “most people have the potential to be resilient if basic adaptive systems and protective factors such as community and family supports are in place.”

One insight from Greene, Galambos, and Youjung’s research is that an individual’s “personal attitude is central to becoming resilient as they develop and gain access to resources.” For instance, having a reliable social network that one can rely on. Furthermore, the team of researchers discovered that spirituality/religion was significant in helping the interview participants to cope with life stress. As the findings of Greene, Galambos, and Youjung

24 Ibid., 78.
26 “Resilience Theory,” 80.
27 Ibid.
demonstrate, understanding what makes people function under adversity can provide the basis to promote well-being as well as to inform social work practice guides. The social-ecological model of resilience offers a theoretical framework through which Nigerian widows’ lived experiences can be conceptualized and subsequently guides this research, with its assumptions tested and analyzed in Chapter 5. In addition to the stress and adversity that Nigerian widows face, there is also trauma, a major aspect of resilience research that previous research on Nigerian widows does not often address.

**Gender Trauma and Resilience**

In this study, I also adopt a trauma-informed approach because trauma of any kind affects the way one feels and acts. Trauma is any event that mentally, physically, or emotionally threatens an individual’s well-being and sense of security. The gendering of trauma not only serves to impinge on a women’s social, economic, cultural, and political rights, but also on her agency. Gender trauma is the outcome of oppressive social structures in society, and the effects can present difficulties in coping afterward. The APA identifies traumatic events to include sexual abuse, terrorism, war, accidents, and natural disasters that are public in nature; however, there is also the less public trauma that can result from domestic abuse, gender-based violence, socially and culturally marginalized and oppressed groups, and this is the type of trauma that I seek to address.  

28 Stephanie Covington, a pioneer in trauma-informed approaches, defines trauma as “both an event and a particular response to an event.”  
29 According to Covington, trauma surpasses violence to include stigmatization induced by gender, poverty, or race.  

Although the issue of gender trauma is a significant area of research, it is not often considered in

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30 Ibid., 379.
research on marginalized women. Using a gendered lens, this study acknowledges the trauma Nigerian women experience on multiple levels and seeks to understand their resilient responses.

Dominick LaCapra posits that trauma cannot be viewed as a “purely psychological or individual phenomenon.” According to LaCapra, “trauma as a concept has crucial connections to social and political conditions and it is only by engaging the necessary structures that we can begin to understand trauma as a concept.” In this context, LaCapra recognizes the trauma that individuals experience through the socio-cultural realities in which they are embedded. LaCapra’s call to “engage the necessary structures” entails challenging dominant power relations and social structures that serve to inflict gender trauma through various social institutions such as forced marriages, female genital mutilation, and widowhood practices. Other scholars, notably Sylvia Tamale and more recently Meera Atkinson, share LaCapra’s theoretical perspective on trauma.

Tamale, a Ugandan legal scholar and feminist, addresses the theme of gender trauma in African women in her article, “Gender Trauma in Africa: Enhancing Women's Links to Resources.” Tamale focuses on the socio-cultural inequalities that hamper African women’s growth and advancement in society in ways that result in traumatizing them. Insisting that “Africa cannot afford to ignore women if it is to achieve democracy and sustainable development,” Tamale maintains that the patriarchal state and its patriarchs operate to hinder women’s access to the public space by using several existing practices “including culture, the law and religion to safeguard the public sphere as a domain of male hegemony.” In such cases,

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31 Writing History, Writing Trauma, xi.
32 Ibid.
33 “Gender Trauma in Africa,” 50-61.
34 Ibid., 26.
the women become pawns in the hands of those who help perpetuate patriarchy in society. Likewise, Atkinson, an interdisciplinary researcher, adopts a similar ideology of trauma when she asserts that patriarchy perpetuates trauma and gives rise to a multitude of sufferings and strife.\textsuperscript{36} Tamale and Atkinson’s views on gender trauma that results from patriarchal structures are critical in understanding how widowhood practices serve not only as tools of patriarchy in Africa, but also as a source of trauma to women in general and widows in particular. How then are individuals who undergo this type of trauma able to conceive of and go on to demonstrate resilience?

George Bonanno, a pioneer researcher in the field of bereavement and trauma asserts that resilience has consistently emerged as the most common trajectory in individuals who have lost a spouse.\textsuperscript{37} Bonanno explains, however that although there is no single resilient type, individuals tend to demonstrate resilience in diverse and unexpected ways.\textsuperscript{38} Psychologist Curtis McMillen also notes that individuals who have gone through extremely stressful and adverse circumstances can prevail over and resist its effects.\textsuperscript{39} Drawing on McMillen’s theory of positive outcomes after adverse and traumatic events, like Bonanno, McMillen states that traumatic events create avenues to enhance competence in dealing with problems, a realization of what is important in life, and finding meaning in adversity.\textsuperscript{40} Finally, McMillen identifies factors such as age, class, personality, and type of event as determinants of an individual’s response to adversity.\textsuperscript{41}

\textsuperscript{36} “Patriarchy Perpetuates Trauma. It’s Time to Face the Fact,” \textit{The Guardian} April 2018, 3. \texttt{https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/apr/30/patriarchy-perpetuates-trauma-its-time-to-face-the-fact}. Also, see Atkinson’s latest book titled \textit{Traumata} (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2018. In her book, Atkinson addresses the traumatic roots of social structures and how it leads to issues such as intergenerational trauma.

\textsuperscript{37} “Resilience in the Face of Potential Trauma,” 136.

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 135.

\textsuperscript{39} “Better for It,” 455.

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 459-460.

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 461-462.
Consequently, these insights lead to the following questions: how do Nigerian widows cope and survive in the face of adversity? What do they do to survive? How do they make meaning of their traumatic experiences? What are their unique widowhood experiences? How much of their ability to cope is based on internal and external factors? What are those factors that enable some widows to cope and thrive in adversity while others become victims of their experiences and socio-cultural environment? In other to answer these questions, the feminist epistemological and methodological approach that maintains, “inquiry is best started from within women’s material experiences,” influences this study. This theory is significant for my research because women are the focus and its underlying theory is that the researcher’s questions are best directed to groups who have experienced marginalization.

**Feminist Standpoint Theory**

The concept of feminist standpoint emerged in the 1970s from second-wave feminism as another feminist effort to reconceptualize ways of knowing, producing, and validating knowledge. Standpoint theory offers a nuanced approach to knowledge generation that challenges traditional epistemological assumptions about how one comes to know what we know. The operative ideological framework of standpoint theory lies in its claim to epistemic authority and privilege, and it is inspired by the works of Georg W.F. Hegel and Karl Marx. Both Hegel and Marx, German philosophers, posit that the marginalized and oppressed hold an epistemic advantage; this insight serves as the theoretical basis for founding standpoint

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43 Ibid.
Hegel and Marx make this assumption based on their theory that individuals or groups who belong to the oppressed class may possess special access to information not available to those from a more privileged class.

Since the inception of standpoint theory, several key feminist scholars including Nancy Hartsock, Sandra Harding, Patricia Hill Collins, Dorothy Smith, and Elizabeth Borland have enhanced the concept of standpoint theory in their research. Borland, a sociologist, defines standpoint theory as a feminist theoretical stance that queries the objectivity of traditional science and suggests research, and indeed theory, has ignored and marginalized women and feminist ways of thinking. Patricia Hill Collins, a social theorist and pioneer of black feminism, views feminist standpoint theory as a framework that addresses unjust power dynamics and rely on knowledge as critical in overcoming such inequalities. Both Borland and Collins recognize the unique viewpoint of those women, who are often unnoticed or overlooked in favor of more dominant groups in society. More often than not, this refers to women with lower socioeconomic standing in society, but it can also refer to women in general.

Who then are these women whose social realities form the basis of knowledge? Harding identifies them as those who face oppression and domination in society and she maintains, “Human experience provides the best knowledge.” Knowledge from women and other marginalized groups can help to generate insights for a wide variety of fields and disciplines,

45 Both Hegel’s theory of the master and slave relationship and Marx’s theory of class and capitalism inspired the intellectual origins of founding standpoint theorists such as Nancy Hartsock and Dorothy Smith.
46 Hartsock, Harding, Smith, and Collins are prominent feminist philosophers best known for their contribution towards standpoint theory and feminist epistemology.
among them, psychology, sociology, education, and anthropology. It can also provide critical insights for both feminist and non-feminist researchers.

The value of standpoint theory has been the topic of many articles and studies, with Harding asserting that the innovations of standpoint theory brings into focus a fresh perspective on difficult and anxiety-producing dilemmas.\(^{50}\) Providing tangible insight into the concept of standpoint theory, Collins declares that standpoint theory was never designed “as a theory of truth or method,” but rather as a tool that acknowledges power relationships and explains social inequalities.\(^{51}\) Through the standpoints of marginalized women, sociocultural patterns that produce and reinforce gender inequalities are revealed. As Collins explain, feminist standpoint theory does not concern itself so much with discovering the truth as much as reconceptualizing ways of generating knowledge grounded in the varied yet shared experiences of marginalized groups.

Feminist philosophers have sought to include the narratives and standpoints of women and other marginalized groups (often ignored or deemed unimportant) in mainstream research because of their claim that other ways exist to generate knowledge outside of scientific methods. Harding asserts that “knowledge claims certified by modern Western sciences were assumed to be grounded in reality in ways that claims without such a pedigree were not.”\(^{52}\) The underlying factor here is that women who are given the opportunity to tell their stories from their own standpoints can then begin to understand their circumstances better, and to gain a heightened awareness of the patriarchal structures that serve to undermine and oppress them in their communities.

\(^{50}\) “Standpoint Theory as a Site of Political, Philosophical, and Scientific Debate,” 1.
\(^{51}\) “Comment on Hekman's 'Truth and Method,” 375-376.
\(^{52}\) “Standpoint Theory as a Site of Political, Philosophical, and Scientific Debate,” 10.
Philosopher Thomas Kuhn addresses the introduction of more nuanced ways of learning and generating knowledge. In his book *The Structure of Scientific Revolution*, Thomas Kuhn recognizes a paradigm shift in the way scientists conduct research and points out that the “rules for normal research” are loosened, and new approaches to knowledge formation are acknowledged and even embraced in modern science. In sum, feminist standpoint theory serves as a way of producing knowledge that is different from that produced by hegemonic groups in society or by modern science. Second-wave feminists consider this sort of knowledge as more objective and less partial than that of the dominant groups, who wield more power in society.

Standpoint theory has come under severe criticism from other feminist theorists, notably Susan Hekman and Mary Hawkesworth. Despite its promise and potential as a tool for generating knowledge and serving to empower oppressed groups, Alison Wylie, an archeologist and feminist philosopher, observes that the standpoint theory may rank as one of the most controversial theories in second-wave feminist scholarship. There are several sources of controversy surrounding standpoint theory, two of which are relevant to this study.

In “Truth and Method: Feminist Standpoint Theory Revisited,” Hekman, a postmodern feminist and political theorist, describes the concept of standpoint theory as “a quaint relic of feminism’s less sophisticated past” based on the onslaught of criticisms it has faced from other

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feminist theorists. Although she acknowledges that standpoint theory represents a shift in the concept of knowledge, Hekman nevertheless queries Harding’s, Hartsock’s, Collin’s, and Smith’s view that oppressed groups possess epistemic privilege. Drawing her inspiration from Max Weber’s work, Hekman insists that no perspective is epistemically privileged because “the reality of women’s lives is itself a socially constructed discursive formation.” Hekman questions the privilege and objectivity that standpoint theorists attach to the social experience of marginalized individuals and groups. Furthermore, she insists that the refusal of Harding, Hartsock, Collins, and Smith to acknowledge this flaw in their arguments only results in unresolved theoretical tensions. Even though Hekman maintains that “standpoint theory can and should be reconceptualized as a counterhegemonic discourse that works to destabilize power differentials in society,” she nevertheless maintains that ultimately it is a discourse and therefore should not be accorded any epistemic privilege. To Hekman, knowledge is socially constructed and so cannot occupy any position of privilege because it is not free from bias.

Mary Hawkesworth echoes Hekman’s criticism of standpoint theory in her article “Analyzing Backlash: Feminist Standpoint Theory As An Analytical Tool,” in which she argues that feminist standpoint theory “fails to do justice to the fallibility of human knowers, the multiplicity and diversity of women’s experiences, and the theoretical constitution of experience.” As a theory of knowledge, Hawkesworth describes the concept of feminist

57 Ibid., 356.
58 Ibid., 361. Max Weber was a German philosopher and social scientist whose works influenced social theory in the late 19th century and he is still cited by modern scholars. Hekman draws on his concept that presupposes that social analysis is always undertaken by situated, engaged agents who live in a discursively constituted world. For more on Weber’s work, see “The Methodology of the Social Sciences, ed. Edward Shils and Henry Finch (New York: Free Press, 1949).
standpoint theory as “seriously flawed,” because it relies on the experience of women as the basis of truth.\textsuperscript{62} Hawkesworth maintains that instead of emphasizing the truth embedded in their experience and succumbing to relativism, standpoint theory can instead serve as an analytical tool to gather data for analyzing competing claims advanced by women.\textsuperscript{63} Simply put, epistemological relativism is the idea that knowledge claims are only valid when linked to a group or a specific cultural or social context. Hawksworth’s argument here is that knowledge is always situated and that situatedness itself is the litmus test for validity or truth. So, aware of these (and other) criticisms leveled against feminist standpoint theory, how then should scholars proceed? Does this mean that standpoint theory is not useful to researchers, either feminist or non-feminist?

Harding provides some answers in her article, “Comment on Hekman’s ‘Truth and Method: Feminist Standpoint Theory Revisited’: Whose Standpoint Needs the Regimes of Truth and Reality?,” wherein she explains that standpoint theory does not lay claim to truth nor does it claim to possess a more accurate account of reality. Rather, as a theory, Harding maintains that standpoint theory is mostly concerned with exploring insights from women’s narratives that will prove useful and invariably lead to knowledge that can enable women to live better lives.\textsuperscript{64} Although Harding agrees with Hekman that all knowledge claims are determinately situated, she explains that not all social perspectives can provide objective responses. To Harding, “some

\textsuperscript{62} “Analyzing Backlash,” 135.
\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., 135-136.
discursive accounts tend to provide richer resources than others for understanding the natural and social worlds, and it is in this sense that the term epistemic privilege enters the conversation.”

Despite the theoretical complexities and inherent contentions surrounding standpoint theory, it has remained central to contemporary feminism and this may be because standpoint theory provides a framework through which the viewpoint of marginalized subjects can offer critical insights for researchers across disciplines. The use of standpoint theory as a method of inquiry enhances this study in three ways. First, standpoint theory reveals a clearer understanding of the socio-cultural practices and unequal power relations that undermine and strip Nigerian widows of their rights and dignity. Second, standpoint theory offers critical insights into the everyday lives and experiences of twelve Nigerian widows interviewed here, with each widow’s narrative contributing to knowledge production through their varied gendered experiences. According to Brenda Allen, the insights gained from women’s standpoint can be used to obtain a clearer understanding of their coping mechanisms as well as reveal aspects of the social order that are not immediately obvious. In addition, using standpoint theory can reveal the ways widows exercise agency and empower themselves as they contend and cope with adverse widowhood practices. Lastly, the use of feminist standpoint theory is compatible with this research because of its emphasis on making women’s voices heard, which according to Harding, “can lead to knowledge that enables women to improve the conditions of their lives” and empower themselves. Although several scholars often view Nigerian widows through the lens of vulnerability in their scholarship, I use the narratives of twelve Nigerian widows to examine the ways in which they can cope with the stress and trauma of widowhood practices.

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65 “Comment on Hekman's 'Truth and Method',' 388.
Julian Rappaport, a social psychiatrist, provides some insight into the far-reaching effects of giving voice to marginalized women. In “Empowerment Meets Narrative: Listening to Stories and Creating Settings,” Rappaport identifies a correlation between empowerment and narratives when he states that “stories tell us not only who we are but who we have been and who we can be.” Insisting that narratives create meaning, Rappaport explains that privileging the voices of the people we study is consistent with the empowerment of people. The marginalized standpoints of the twelve Nigerian widows serve as a starting place from which their acts of agency and the ways in which they empower themselves can begin to emerge. Overall, the narratives of these widows can provide insights into how other widows in Nigeria can also begin to empower themselves and in doing so, contribute to sociocultural change.

Using standpoint theory, I seek to contribute to the growing body of resilience-based research that studies reveal can help to overcome the effects of adversity, stress, and trauma. In addition, resilience studies demonstrate that some individuals can “bounce back” to physical, emotional, and mental well-being in spite of challenging circumstances. As Harding maintains, standpoint theory has survived and is flourishing as a “seductively volatile site for reflection and debate about challenging contemporary dilemmas.” A large number of scholars and researchers across disciplines supports this insight and thus continue to use standpoint theory as a methodological and epistemological tool in their work.

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69 Ibid., 801.

70 “Standpoint Theory as a Site of Political, Philosophical, and Scientific Debate,” 13.
Phenomenology

In order to obtain a comprehensive understanding of adverse widowhood practices and to
discover the ways in which Nigerian widows handle the challenges, I chose to use both surveys
and interviews. A phenomenological style research is simply the study of phenomena from the
viewpoint of research participants. The phenomenological interview emerged from a post-
modern approach that enables the researcher to contextualize the lived experience of participants,
allowing their voices to be heard. The term post-modern has taken on many meanings since
philosophers conceptualized it in the late nineteenth century. Post-modernism is a philosophical
movement that originated from the works of philosophers such as Friedrich Nietzsche and
Jacques Derrida. Ferdinand Potgieter and Johannes Van der Walt describe postmodernism as a
“zeitgeist or broad approach to life that emphasizes the existence of different worldviews and
concepts of reality rather than one “correct” or “true” one.”

As a philosophy, postmodernism opposes the rigid truth claims of positivism and old epistemic traditions, and rather values the
social constructivist approach to knowledge construction.

Edmund Husserl, a German philosopher, conceptualized the term “phenomenology”
around 1900 in his study on consciousness and experience of the human life world. The
phenomenological perspective rests on the understanding that an individual’s life experience and
the meaning s/he makes of the phenomena under study should be the starting point for research.
The phenomenological interview approach fits well with my research interests because as Svend

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71 “Postmodern Relativism and the Challenge to Overcome the “Value-Vacuum,” Stellenbosch Theological Journal 1, no. 1 (2015): 238,
http://www.academia.edu/16067117/Postmodern_relativism_and_the_challenge_to_overcome_the_value-vacuum_ (accessed October 8, 2018).
Brinkman and Steiner Kvale maintain, it helps one to understand themes in the lived daily world from the subject’s perspective.73

In sum, resilience research involves investigating and discovering the core factors that enable individuals to rise above their challenges by relying on the interplay between different factors including biological, psychosocial, and cultural influences that regulate their response to stressful and traumatic experiences.74 How can resilience effectively be fostered in the wake of trauma? Scholars continue to research resilience in order to map out the trajectories of individual responses to stress, adversity, and trauma. The use of both standpoint theory and a phenomenological approach are complementary theories in qualitative research, as both methods focus on producing new knowledge through subjective experience. The compelling evidence of phenomenology and its growing popularity abounds as studies continue to provide tangible and invaluable insights for gaining a better, more comprehensive understanding of resilience. The next chapter gives more attention to a diverse range of research that scholars have undertaken across disciplines and fields using both resilience-based approaches as well as feminist standpoint theory.

74 Southwick, Bonanno, Masten, Panther-Brick, and Yehuda, “Resilience Definitions, Theory, and Challenges,” 2.
CHAPTER 3
LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter examines the existing literature and perspectives of scholars, focusing on the following areas: Nigerian women as historical actors situated within a patriarchal order; qualitative research on marginalized women with respect to resilience; the significance of a resilience-based approach in response to persistent social issues; a review of feminist scholarship on the lived experience of women as a worthy source of inquiry and knowledge production; and lastly, the role of resilience in strengthening Nigerian widows’ agency and empowerment, with implications for personal and sociocultural change. For the purpose of this review, I drew on the intellectual works and insights of both African and Western scholars across relevant disciplines.

Froma Walsh, a resilience-oriented researcher, describes the death and loss of a loved one as a “most painful challenge with ripple effects” and this is undoubtedly true for most widows.\(^1\) Moreover, besides the normal grief and pain that Nigerian widows experience when they lose their husbands, African tradition and culture often demand that they undergo certain rites and rituals that vary across ethnic groups. Ebenezer Durojaye describes these practices as disturbing and discriminatory, with severe consequences for women’s well-being.\(^2\) It is vital to recognize the ways in which widowhood practices affect Nigerian women in general and to study the strategies they employ to cope because of the implication, not only for female empowerment, but also for social change.

\(^2\)“Woman, but not Human,” 2-3.
Over time, widowhood practices in most regions in Nigeria has become a complex social phenomenon that requires a comprehensive examination of the different facets of the problem. Sefinatu Dogo, a political scientist describes the Nigerian social and cultural structures as patriarchal with unequal gender relations that cast most women in a subordinate position. As a result, the disparity that Nigerian women face has several consequences for them and one is the imposition of widowhood practices. Wuraola Adeyemo’s study details some of these practices below:

- The widow’s in-laws insist that the brother or uncle of her deceased husband must marry her or else she will be left to fend for herself and children;
- The widow cannot inherit her husband’s property;
- The widow carries out compulsory mourning rites such as shaving off her hair, wearing only a black or a white outfit for a period ranging from seven days to one year, and not taking a bath. During confinement, the widow sits on the bare floor or leaves as she mourns her late husband.

The effect of these practices on widows is traumatizing and distressing as they are already grieving. Chapter 2 addressed the issue of gender trauma with Meera Atkinson stating that patriarchy perpetuates trauma and gives rise to a multitude of sufferings and strife. The social construction of widowhood practices cannot be separated from the existing patriarchal system embedded within the sociocultural structures in Nigeria. According to Sylvia Walby, “patriarchy is a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit..."
women.”\(^8\) In Nigeria, some widows experience multiple levels of trauma and adversity by virtue of their widowhood status, and this has led several scholars such as Wuraola Adeyemo and Austin Ezejiofor to insist that the practices some widows undergo in Nigeria are inherently gendered as they are reserved mostly for women who lose their husbands and not the other way around.\(^9\)

One vital topic that this review addresses is the role of patriarchy and its overarching effects on women. According to political scientist Makama Godiya, patriarchy “sets the parameters for women’s structurally unequal position,” that often results in a system unjust to women.\(^10\) The role of women in any society is of utmost importance to the social order of that setting and yet Nigerian women remain in the background. The system of patriarchy sets forth an unequal distribution of power among men and women, with dire outcomes for women, and as Walby maintains, patriarchy becomes “an essential tool in the analysis of gender relations.”\(^11\) To gain insight into why Nigerian widows are treated the way they are, it is vital to trace the historical experience of Nigerian women through pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial Africa.

**Nigerian Women as Historical Actors Situated Within Patriarchal Settings**

African women face oppressive and inequitable practices in almost every facet of their lives and according to historian Judith Bennett, in women’s history, “the distant past tells a story

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of enduring patriarchy.” The origin of gender oppression and patriarchy has been the topic of debate among several scholars. Some historians such as Toyin Falola and Pamela Scully argue that the origin and oppression of African women can be traced to the coming of the European colonial masters in the twentieth century. Falola argues that gender roles in pre-colonial Nigeria were more balanced with women taking part in social, economic, and even political activities in society. Similarly, Scully also asserts that women served in various capacities as farmers, traders, and religious figures in the pre-colonial era. The historical literature shows that Nigerian women in the pre-colonial era were not passive but held various sociopolitical positions of importance in society. For instance, according to Nimah Abdulraheem, in the old Benin Kingdom, the king’s mother played an important role as an adviser in his administration. In addition, in the North, women also played prominent roles in the socio-political affairs of the society; Queen Amina of Zazzau and Queen Moremi of Ile-Ife represent some of the great female warriors and leaders of the sixteenth century.

Nonetheless, other scholars such as Maria Rojas observes that the “societies of pre-colonial Nigeria believed men superior to women and, to some extent, in control of women.” Using religion as an example, Rojas argues that the state employed religious convictions as an important means of controlling women by determining the appropriate social roles for women.

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16 Ibid., 4.
18 Ibid.
Rojas also notes that though some Nigerian women were able to achieve power, they did this through patriarchal structures and rarely showed their influence in public.\textsuperscript{19} Although it is clear that some Nigerian women in pre-colonial Nigeria were involved in public life, the literature also reveals that they did not enjoy equal rights with men thus demonstrating that some measure of patriarchy and male domination existed in pre-colonial indigenous societies even before the European colonialists’ incursion into Nigeria. As Abdulraheem affirms, in spite of the prominent roles that women occupied in pre-colonial indigenous societies, “the imposition of certain limitations is a testimony to the fact that the powers exercised by women in political activities of some communities were far less than that of their male counterparts.”\textsuperscript{20}

Still, the colonial period brought with it a different structure that affected the status of women and rather than creating equal roles for men and women, it only served to reinforce the already existing structure. This was mainly because the colonial masters came from patriarchal nations, so their institutions and cultural models were invariably patriarchal. According to Scully, the coming of the European colonial masters “reshaped women’s roles,” and they were excluded from taking part in the new occupations that the colonialists introduced.\textsuperscript{21}

It is important to point out here that in pre-colonial Nigeria, women played a large role in agriculture and this was not in line with what the European and British colonizers were used to; they were used to a system where men controlled agriculture. For instance, the colonizers introduced the men to the technologies in agriculture and commercialization, while the women were delegated to grow food crops and take care of household matters.\textsuperscript{22} In addition, John Njoku states that the British Legislative Council of the colonial government had no record of a single

\textsuperscript{19} “Women in Pre-Colonial Nigeria,” 1.
\textsuperscript{20} “Women in the Political Process and Human Rights,” 3.
\textsuperscript{21} “Should We Give Up on the State?” 35-36.
\textsuperscript{22} “Women and Development in Africa,” 45.
woman appointed to represent the country throughout the colonial period. This has led Fredoline Anunobi to argue that the seeds of patriarchy and male dominance were planted under colonialism and the result was that women’s status and autonomy became systematically undermined while men gained political, social, and economic advantages. Anunobi argues that “tradition was usually interpreted in ways that favored men’s control over women, allowing men to gain at women’s expense.” Nevertheless, although the British colonizers played a role in sowing seeds of gender inequality, this pattern continued long after the colonizers handed over the reins of independence to Nigeria. Indeed, Scully notes that the “post-colonial state continued to uphold discriminatory practices against women that colonialism helped institute” and today, patriarchy has become a norm that operates to reinforce inequalities in almost all spheres of the African woman’s life. According to a 2012 British Council report on Gender, “Nigeria ranks 118 out of 134 countries in the gender equality index.” Although there is much more recognition of gender rights in developed countries, in less developed countries such as Nigeria, women are still subject to patriarchal and draconian interpretations of religious, social, and cultural practices.

Despite obvious disagreement amongst scholars on the extent of social and cultural independence that Nigerian women enjoyed in the pre-colonial period, the historical analysis reveals the power hierarchies created decades ago in Africa that still keep Nigerian women in

25. Ibid., 49.
positions of subordination. Over time, patriarchal ideologies pervaded the way society perceives women and this in turn influenced her widowhood status and the treatment she receives. Although the historical analysis of Nigerian women reveals that patriarchy has subordinated women to men and sheds some light on the original development of widowhood rites, it does not provide a description of the specific beliefs that lie beneath these practices.

Several scholars point to different root causes of widowhood practices. Current research shows a correlation between superstitious beliefs and widowhood practices. For instance, Adeyemo, who insists that these rites have existed for quite some time and have been transferred from generation to generation, maintains that male dominance significantly influence the present-day practices of widowhood in Nigeria. Following suit, Olukayode Akinbi also observes that the role of superstition, rooted in African traditional religion, fuels widowhood rites and practices. An example is the belief that the spirit of the dead man will continue to wander and have no rest unless the widow performs these rites. So, the wife has to go through all these widowhood practices to appease the dead.

Another African belief is that a woman who outlives her husband must have killed him through witchcraft. This belief hinges on the idea that that when a woman’s husband dies, the death did not occur naturally. Therefore, to prove her innocence, she must go through various rites and rituals. Oyeniyi Aransiola and Ayodeji Ige conducted a qualitative study on thirty Yoruba widows, one of whom stated, “I was forced to drink the water used to bath my husband’s corpse to prove my innocence of his death.”

30 Ibid.
31 “Widowhood Practices Among The Yorubas Of South West Nigeria: Are There Differences In What Women Experience Due To Their Status?,” Gender & Behavior 8, no. 2 (Dec 2010): 3162,
Spiritual beliefs as a foundation for widowhood practices was the basis of a recent article by Kingsley Okoro and Chinyere Nkama. Both authors draw from George Tasie’s article, “African Widowhood Rites: A Bane or Boom for the African Woman,” to argue that the motive behind widowhood rites is to maintain the spiritual harmony between the physical and spiritual worlds. Okoro and Nkama, who argue in support of widowhood practices, go on to explain that widows are “exposed to the cross-fire of the spiritual and physical worlds” and that these mourning rites provide social stability for both the widow and the community as a whole.

Interestingly, Matsobane Manala insists that scholars such as Tasie, who argue in support of widowhood practices ignore the fact that these rites only exist to serve the whims of patriarchy.

Tayo George conducted a mixed method study involving 942 widows in Awori town, a Yoruba sub-ethnic group in Ogun state. In her study, George set out to examine the role of religion and its level of influence on widowhood practices using both interviews and survey questionnaires. The participants included Christians, Muslims, and traditional worshippers and the results reveal that religious beliefs informed widowhood practices with 742 of the 942 widows affirming the fact that widowhood practices are tied to religion and tightly woven into the fabric of most Nigerian ethnic cultures. According to Walby, “religion has historically been used by patriarchy as a tool in carrying out its agenda.” Although the origins of widowhood

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33 Ibid., 42.
36 Walby, Theorizing Patriarchy, 227.
practices are not clear, one insight that emerges from this analysis is that it has existed for a long time and operates to traumatize some widows, despite arguments to the contrary. Human rights activists, non-governmental organizations, and other social groups have also questioned and condemned the different roles that widowhood practices hold for men and women. 37

Feminist and non-feminist scholars continue to question the value of these practices today, particularly as their continued observance threatens both the wellbeing and agency of women. In addition, widowhood practices undermine women socially, economically, and politically, reinforcing historical patterns of oppression. Given the persistence of widowhood practices, I advocate for a resilience-focused approach to the sociocultural phenomena of adverse widowhood practices as a more sustainable approach to one that merely emphasizes the problem. In other words, the use of a resilience approach to a complex social subject such as widowhood practices can proffer practical ways in which Nigerian widows can learn to understand and to navigate through these practices. Moreover, this study suggests moving away from the more common problem-based discourse that offers few solutions to the problem and instead for the focus to be on examining the resilient responses of widows. Resilience as a framework has significant applications in efforts to improve Nigerian widows’ well-being, as well as consequences for female agency, empowerment, and sociocultural change.

The area of resilience is one that has been under-represented in the scholarship on widowhood; one reason may be that scholars have yet to investigate resilience in marginalized and oppressed Nigerian women. Nigerian feminist researcher and scholar, Amina Mama offers some insight into the paucity of research on marginalized women when she notes that conducting

feminist research in an African context has been difficult given the unstable and undemocratic environments in which many scholars have had to operate. According to Mama, the patriarchal culture of Nigerian institutions continues to hinder feminist scholarship so that “potentially contentious issues” may not receive the academic attention they deserve. Some examples include research in areas such as child marriage, access to education, female circumcision, and domestic violence. Other scholars such as Catherine Burnette and Zoe Hendrickson have also observed the paucity of research on marginalized women.

Drawing from a qualitative study, Hendrickson and her team of eight researchers explored the topic of resilience in the lives of four Nepali widows. Hendrickson and her team insist that the lived experience of widows constitutes an important area of investigation for researchers. The researchers find that carrying out studies on marginalized women provides a better understanding of the sociocultural context that shape the way a widow responds to trauma and adversity. Furthermore, the team recognizes a correlation between understanding resilient responses of widows and the impact of this knowledge on efforts to improve the widows’ long-term health and well-being.

Similarly, Burnette conducted a study on a group of indigenous women from the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians to broaden awareness of how they demonstrate resilience.

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39 Ibid., 4.
42 Ibid., 466
43 “Resilience Among Nepali Widows,” 466.
in response to adversity.\textsuperscript{44} In her work, Burnette points out that female resilience is “glaringly under-presented” in research and advocates for more inquiry on resilience.\textsuperscript{45} Furthermore, Burnette claims that despite their remarkable strength, marginalized women tend to be invisible to mainstream society.\textsuperscript{46} The above studies underscore the importance of embarking on research that places women, particularly the marginalized and oppressed, at the center of inquiry. As Hendrickson et al. and Burnette show, despite facing marginalization and oppression through patriarchal interpretations of culture and religion, women are capable of demonstrating resilience, strength, and courage. Therefore, putting women at the center of inquiry serves to make them more visible and at the same time highlights their hidden strengths and coping strategies.

The subject of resilience has become more prominent as a major theoretical and research topic for conceptualizing the individual’s ability to cope in spite of her/his exposure to adversity and trauma. Resilience is an individual or group’s capability to overcome adversity, stress, or trauma in their lives. Existing studies reveal the potential in adopting a resilience-based approach for persistent social issues as well as for marginalized groups. This thesis relies on the work of a range of scholars for critical insights into the phenomena of resilience in the face of loss and stress. For instance, Michael Chen, a doctoral student in the School of Education at Boston University, employed a resilience-based approach to investigate how war-affected and internally displaced widows in Nepal cope with the dire situation in which they find themselves. Chen’s qualitative study on thirty-three widows using focus groups and in-depth interviews show that despite their vulnerable circumstances, the widows were able to demonstrate resilience in their

\textsuperscript{44} “Indigenous Women’s Resilience and Resistance to Historical Oppression,” 253.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid.
settings of adversity, causing Chen to argue for developing the internal capacity of individuals for healthy and positive human development.\textsuperscript{47}

In another qualitative study carried out by Venkat Pulla and Tulshi Das, the authors utilize semi-structured interviews to obtain narratives from Bangladeshi women who live in poverty and have to deal with regular floods that put their lives and livelihood at risk. Pulla and Das focus on the value of studying resilience in the lives of marginalized women and conclude that “radical situations require human beings to reinvent and rise above their limitations.”\textsuperscript{48} The narratives of the interview participants reveal “their enduring capacity to persevere, adapt, and most importantly, to maintain hope.”\textsuperscript{49} In sum, the literature illustrates: 1) that marginalized or oppressed groups can benefit from writing about or testifying to adversity and 2) there is strength from developing and constructing ways to overcome the negative impact of events. These studies also indicate the potential of resilience research as a tool for exploring themes of agency and empowerment in Nigerian widows.

In addition to the individuals’ ability to demonstrate resilience in adversity and stress, the scholarship on loss and trauma indicates that individuals are able to cope with loss and trauma. Trauma theorist George Bonanno, in “Loss, Trauma, and Human Resilience: Have We Underestimated the Human Capacity to Thrive After Extremely Aversive Events?”\textsuperscript{49} insists that individuals are capable of demonstrating resilience to loss and traumatic events. In his study,

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item “Coping and Resilience: Women Headed Households in Bangladesh Floods,” \textit{International Journal of Social Work and Human Services Practice} 3, no. 5 (December 2015): 171,
\item Ibid., 169.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
Bonanno observes “there are multiple and unexpected pathways to resilience and this includes the personality traits of hardiness, self-enhancement, positive emotion, and laughter.”  

Posttraumatic growth is an area of research that examines the extent to which individuals perceive personal benefits or positive transformations in the aftermath of traumatic life events. In their article, “The Posttraumatic Growth Inventory: Measuring the Positive Legacy of Trauma,” Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun, psychologists and pioneers in the research and theory on posttraumatic growth, draw attention to the possibility that people exposed to even the most traumatic events may discover some good as a result of their struggle. The authors conducted three different studies and drew conclusions from the responses of participants who had previously experienced significant negative life events including bereavement. Tedeschi and Calhoun discovered some of the positive outcomes that can result from traumatic events to include an appreciation for life, spiritual change, new possibilities, and personal strength. This is not to say that individuals who experience trauma, loss, or adversity do not experience some measure of grief or a period of uncertainty. George Bonanno, Camille Wortman, and Randolph Nesse share some insights on this in “Prospective Patterns of Resilience and Maladjustment During Widowhood.” In their study, the authors employ longitudinal data from another study on bereaved adults and one of their primary findings show that bereaved individuals are capable of demonstrating resilience in the face of loss. Another key insight from this study was that even

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52 Ibid., 459.

resilient individuals are not spared from at least some initially distressing thoughts and emotions related to the death of their spouse.\textsuperscript{54}

It is important to note here that the word “resilience” should not be interpreted as a superhuman ability to survive challenges. Psychologist and resilience researchers, Ann Masten and Raymond Fowler draw attention to the concept of “invulnerability” which sometimes assumes that individuals are somewhat herculean in their resistance to stress, and instead the authors describe resilience as “Ordinary Magic.”\textsuperscript{55} Masten insists that “resilience is made of ordinary rather than extraordinary processes” and goes on to decry the image of immunity to challenges perpetuated by some scholars and the media.\textsuperscript{56} In other words, the concept of resilience derives not from any convoluted circumstance but rather from the every day, “ordinary” activities of people.

As scholars call attention to the value of studying resilience, Janet Ledesma points out that individuals tend to respond to adversity and stress in various ways.\textsuperscript{57} For example, one person may yield under the pressure of adversity, and another will respond in positive ways.\textsuperscript{58} Also, individuals rely on different strategies to help them cope. This then raises the critical question of what makes some individuals cope better than others when faced with the same traumatic and stressful circumstance. Several scholars have conducted studies to discover whether a widow’s social status (for instance, education or ethnicity) affects the intensity of her widowhood experience. Employing survey questionnaires in their study, Olufunke Chenube and

\begin{itemize}
\item Bonanno, Wortman, and Nesse, “Prospective Patterns of Resilience and Maladjustment During Widowhood,” 268
\item Ibid., 227.
\item Ibid., 2.
\end{itemize}
Florence Omumu found that widows from low economic status tend to have a more negative experience of grief and more problems than did those from a higher economic status. This finding is consistent with that of Oyeniyi and Ayodeji, whose qualitative research led them to conclude that the intensity and observance of widowhood practices differ according to the widows’ social status. Based on these findings, it is evident that a widow’s social status plays a role in her observance of widowhood practices; the extent to which this affects a widow’s experiences will be tested in the next chapter.

In investigating which factors enable Nigerian widows to survive and cope with the trauma and adversity that they undergo due to hegemonic sociocultural norms, two questions arise: How can one identify the most effective method to discover the factors that trigger resilience in Nigerian widows? Can the narratives of Nigerian widows be regarded as a source of knowledge through which one can begin to understand the different ways they conceptualize their experience and demonstrate resilience? In the last decade, a few Nigerian scholars, among them, Betty Iruloh, Williams Elsie, and Falana Akinlabi, have begun to investigate the adjustment strategies or coping mechanisms of Nigerian widows, thus revealing that the subject of ways in which Nigerian widows are coping with the social, cultural, and economic burden of adverse widowhood practices is becoming a topic worthy of scholarly attention.
In their study, Iruloh and Elsie conducted a quantitative study on three hundred and seventy widows in Rivers State, Nigeria to discover their adjustment or coping strategies to widowhood stress. To explain their research design, the authors list eight strategies that they believe widows commonly adopt to investigate how they cope. These include problem-solving, cognitive restructuring, express emotion, social support, problem avoidance, wishful thinking, self-criticism and social withdrawal. The authors conclude that almost all the widows adopted all eight strategies to cope with widowhood stress irrespective of their age, educational level, ethnic group, and religious affiliation. In another quantitative study that analyzed the difference in coping mechanisms exhibited by young and old Nigerian widows during bereavement, Akinlabi concludes that the participants used similar coping mechanisms.

By focusing on survey data analysis alone, the authors overlook the need to accord widows a voice. Survey alone may not allow marginalized subjects from diverse backgrounds to verbalize and describe their lived experience or to reveal the daily struggles or victories, even small ones. Certain complex social phenomenon, according to Mama “defies simple quantitative study.” As mentioned in my introduction, I sought to extend previous research on widowhood in Nigeria that are more inclined towards the use of quantitative methods that deny Nigerian widows the chance to tell their stories, thus silencing their voices. Consequently, this research seeks to provide Nigerian widows with a voice in other, not only to narrate their struggles and

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62 “Adjustment Strategies of Widows to Widowhood Stress in Rivers State, Nigeria,” 16.
63 Ibid., 21.
64 Ibid., 22.
challenges and uncover their oppression, but also to capture and document their stories of resilience and strength.

Studies That Use Standpoint Theory

Standpoint theory is a feminist approach to knowledge production through the lived experience of marginalized or oppressed groups. As Sandra Harding explains, standpoint theory explores women’s narratives with the aim of obtaining useful insights on how dominant groups think; and this, invariably leads to knowledge that can enable women to improve the conditions of their lives.67 Similarly, Katherine Wormer points out that standpoint theory has several values and insights are of special relevance to women, among them giving voice to victimized women, providing a better “understanding of the gendered nature of power relations in the society,” as well as highlighting personal empowerment and respect for one’s dignity.68 Both Harding and Wormer’s perspectives indicate the benefits of employing standpoint theory as a means of gaining knowledge for both feminist and non-feminist research. As a method, standpoint theory offers a gender-sensitive framework for analyzing the lived experience of women through their narratives and creates a space for questions that would not otherwise get asked.

By foregrounding Nigerian widows and documenting their narratives, I seek to make them visible, both within their societies and across the globe. Several scholars advocate the use of standpoint theory in research on African women in order to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the rationale for gendered practices and to discover ways in which women construct survival strategies within the context of their patriarchal order. In “Wrestling with Standpoint Theory…Some Thoughts on Standpoint and African Feminism,” Maheshvari Naidu,

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67 Comment on Hekman’s ‘Truth and Method,’” 383.
a feminist anthropologist, draws on two ethnographic studies conducted on groups of black African women. Naidu sought to probe what standpoint theory and the theory of epistemic privilege may offer to a discussion of African feminism, given the women’s particular archive of local socio-cultural experiences. Naidu’s analysis shows that by narrating their lived experience, the women in her study reveal ways in which they resist the contexts of embedded power on a daily basis.

In an interesting study that relies on standpoint theory to conceptualize socialization and communication in organizational settings, Brenda Allen recounts excerpts from her lived experience as an African American in a workplace. In her study, Allen demonstrates the use of a standpoint approach in bringing matters such as patriarchy and hegemonic assumptions to light. According to Allen, standpoint theory values African-American women’s perspectives and emotions, and creates space for narratives of lived and local experience that links to broader and institutional relations. Although Allen emphasizes that her experiences are not necessarily the same as those of other women of color, she relies on her own lived experience to highlight and narrate her everyday realities. More importantly, Allen suggests that research such as hers “might provide practical insight into how to affect positive social change as increasing numbers of people of color and women enter the workplace.” Standpoint theory is one of feminism’s contribution to epistemology and methodology that seeks to produce previously unheard

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70 “Wrestling with Standpoint Theory,” 32.
72 Ibid., 261.
73 Ibid., 260-261.
74 Ibid.
75 Ibid., 258.
narratives and knowledge that can help to reveal some of the strategies women employ to cope with and resist gendered oppression and trauma.

Widows as Potential Agents of Socio-Cultural Change Through Empowerment

In his introduction to Mariama Ba’s award winning book *So Long a Letter*, Kenneth Harrow observes the earlier presentation of widows in African literature primarily as disempowered victims, but notes however that Ba’s portrayal of a widowed schoolteacher conveys new visions of the African woman’s experience. Furthermore, Harrow notes that though despair is evident in the narrative, one also sees the complexities of a life confronted with faith and courage. By giving voice to Ramatoulaye, the writer reveals that Ramatoulaye finds the strength to reject her brother-in-law’s marriage proposal shortly after the death of her husband. She states:

> Ah, yes! Your strategy is to get in before any other suitor, to get in before Mawdo, the faithful friend, who has more qualities than you and who also, according to custom, can inherit the wife. You forget that I have a heart, a mind, that I am not an object to be passed from hand to hand, You don’t know what marriage means to me: it is an act of faith and of love, the total surrender of oneself to the person one has chosen and who has chosen.

Though written as fiction, Ba paints a picture of the social, cultural, and religious landscape in which some African women navigate their existence. This includes polygamy, patriarchy, and oppressive practices that some African women face. Finding courage to reject her brother-in-law’s proposal, being able to write about her lived experience, and having a friend in whom she could confide in served as ways in which Ramatoulaye empowered herself.

As I mentioned in Chapter 1, my primary goal in this study is to discover how widows cope and demonstrate resilience in the face of adverse widowhood practices, helping other

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77 Ibid.
78 Ibid., 60.
widows to learn how to cope and gain control of their lives. However, the larger goal of this thesis is to explore the significance of resilience in connection to marginalized womens’ ability to exercise agency within their sociocultural realities. African scholars such as Patrick Edewor and Tayo George argue that the plight of some women in Nigeria is “unhealthy for the nation’s social and economic development because women are a central part of the social dynamics and play an important role in societal development.” Similarly in their article, “The Rights of Nigerian Women in a Patriarchal Society: Implication for Development,” Oluyemo and Ola maintain that “when women are abused physically, emotionally, and sexually, it affects their contribution to the socio-economic and political development of the society.”

The important questions here are: what are the consequences of widows’ resilience? Can Nigerian widows empower themselves through resilience and agency? Endalcachew Bayeh defines empowerment as a “multi-dimensional social process that helps people gain control over their own lives.” For Endalcachew, cultural and social practices that undermine women and their rights in societies also affect the well-being of women as well as social development and socio-cultural transformation. One of the ways women can empower themselves and gain control over their lives is by exercising agency over matters that affect them. In “Agency and Empowerment in Consumption in relation to a Patriarchal Bargain: The Case of Nigerian Immigrant Women in the UK,” Andrew Lindridge, Lisa Penaloza, and Onipreye Worlu explored the agency and empowerment of immigrant Nigerian women living in the United Kingdom.

82 Ibid., 40.
through their consumption choices and within the context of their patriarchal bargain. The authors found varied forms of agency among their study subjects ranging from small to moderate to a greater magnitude, with implications for their agency and empowerment.

In sum, the literature review reveals some of the contexts in which African women navigate their daily existence through patriarchal structures and historical oppression. The review also demonstrates a need for further research to bridge the knowledge gap on how Nigerian widows construct and demonstrate resilience. In addition, the review shows that giving voice to women, in this case Nigerian widows, can provide tangible knowledge that would otherwise not come to light. In other words, the lived experiences of some of these widows can help fuel a better understanding of the nature of resilience and ways in which one’s resilient qualities can be nurtured in vulnerable groups to enhance their agency and empowerment. The application of resilience as a framework for addressing the social phenomena of adverse Nigerian widowhood practice offers an alternative and perhaps more sustainable approach to the age-old and persistent issue of widowhood practices than a problem-focused approach. Through the lens of feminist standpoint theory, this research, therefore seeks to document the lived experience of Nigerian widows who face persistent marginalization by socio-cultural structures. This leads back to the primary question of this research: what are the coping mechanisms that Nigerian widows employ as they deal with adverse widowhood practices?

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84 Ibid., 1666.
CHAPTER 4
RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This section presents a detailed description of the research design and method that I employed to investigate my primary research question: What key factors enable Nigerian widows to cope with and demonstrate resilience to adverse and traumatic widowhood practices? I developed this question after conducting preliminary research on extant literature on widowhood in Nigeria. The result indicated a research gap on the ways Nigerian widows cope and reconstruct their lives after the adverse and traumatic practices they undergo under patriarchal interpretations of religious beliefs and traditional rites.

As I explained in Chapter 3, there is a need for further research on widows’ resilience as psychological studies show that understanding what helps individuals to function under adversity can serve as a basis to promote their well-being. A resilience approach can also help widows learn ways to function better in adverse, stressful, and traumatic situations. This study has implications not only for personal change but also for social change because the resilience approach is one that emphasizes strength in adversity. Moreover, the resilience framework highlights the ways in which Nigerian widows exercise agency to empower themselves even as they face stressful and traumatic widowhood practices. Throughout this research, my focus has been not only to maintain a reflexive awareness of my role as researcher in relation to this study, but also to be mindful of the power asymmetry between the interview participants and myself.

The Rationale for Research Design

What design will be most useful in generating data that can help examine and answer my research question? This was the question that led to my choice of methodology. After careful deliberation, I chose to employ a mixed methodology to discover some of the ways in which
Nigerian widows cope with trauma and demonstrate resilience. A mixed method study is one that employs both quantitative and qualitative methods to address one’s research questions. Examples of qualitative methods include the use of interview and focus groups, while surveys and experiments serve as examples of quantitative methods. Research scientist John Creswell defines mixed methods as an approach to research in which the researcher applies both close-ended (quantitative) and open-ended data (qualitative), integrates the two, and reaches conclusions based on the combined insights of both sets of data.¹ Creswell notes one of the core assumptions in using mixed methods is a “collective strength” that emerges to enhance the study better than using either method alone.² I employed a qualitative, phenomenological method to obtain primary data on the phenomena of widowhood practices and resilience in twelve Nigerian widows. In addition, twenty survey questionnaires provided additional data for my analysis of Nigerian widows’ resilience. Finally, I drew on the scholarship and interpretation of feminist scholars such as Sharlene Hesse-Biber, Amina Mama, Marjorie Devault, and Glenda Gross to analyze my research questions.

I chose to employ a mixed method of inquiry as the means of collecting data that best prove or disprove my thesis because it presents two perspectives, one from the open questions (interview) and the other from the closed questions (survey). Another reason is that it creates more data and affords this study a comprehensive view of the issues addressed.³ As Ranjit Kumar notes, the use of a mixed method can enhance the quality of one’s research. ⁴ The research design for this study sought to explore not only the opinions and attitudes of the interviewees, but also to attain their perspectives, to record their subjective lived experiences,

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² Ibid.
³ Ibid., 15.
and ultimately, to gain a deeper understanding of widows’ resilience than the extant literature can provide. To accomplish these goals, the conceptual frameworks of both resilience, trauma, and feminist standpoint theory served as guides.

**Interdisciplinarity**

The use of an interdisciplinary approach serves to broaden one’s understanding of complex social problems by integrating relevant insights and perspective from two or more disciplines to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena under study as well as to produce new knowledge. According to Allen Repko and Rick Szostak, the role of an interdisciplinarian is to query the elements of relevant disciplines, integrate their various insights, and use the knowledge gained to construct a more comprehensive understanding of one’s research problem.\(^5\) My questions invite an interdisciplinary approach because they address a complex problem that, according to Repko and Szostak, can be best understood through the lens of several disciplines rather than a single one.\(^6\) In this study, I drew from the insights of three disciplines: history, religion, and psychology, as well as from interdisciplinary feminist studies to produce new knowledge that can lead to a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena of widowhood practices in Nigeria. According to Repko and Szostak, the integration of perspectives, assumptions, and methodologies of different disciplines and fields of study can generate new insights that are useful in understanding a problem thoroughly and possibly offer solutions to the problem under study.\(^7\) The disciplinary insights from my analysis of history and religion in Chapter 3 reveal the ways in which patriarchal interpretations of cultural and religious beliefs and practices intersect to impact on and produce gendered relations such as widowhood.

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\(^5\) *Interdisciplinary Research* (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2017), 220. Please note that feminist studies is an interdisciplinary field of study and not a discipline.

\(^6\) Ibid., 8.

\(^7\) Ibid., 38.
practices. The question of how Nigerian widows can learn to cope with traumatic and persistent widowhood practices drives this research and disciplinary insights from social psychology guided my theoretical analysis on resilience and gendered trauma in Nigerian widows. Insights gleaned from resilience theory showed that resilience can emerge in the wake of trauma, stress, and adversity, depending on the individuals’ socio-ecological circumstances and that such individuals may even discover avenues for growth, agency, and empowerment as they demonstrate resilience.

In their article, “Disciplined by Disciplines? The Need for an Interdisciplinary Research Mission in Women’s Studies,” Judith Allen and Sally Kitch insist that “questions posed by feminist analysis have not been fully answered by any single discipline” and so this study crosses disciplinary boundaries to generate new knowledge and obtain critical insights on the topic at hand. 8 Because women are at the center of this research, I employed a feminist framework that aims to make women visible. As Leslie Gelling maintains, “feminist influences on research undoubtedly have a contribution to make in increasing our understanding of the world.” 9

My goal was to correlate these diverse disciplines and fields of study to generate new knowledge and understand ways in which Nigerian widows cope with adverse widowhood practices. The findings and knowledge that emerge from this interdisciplinary study have the overall potential to contribute to the knowledge of widows’ resilience and coping mechanisms, and such knowledge employed by other scholars, activist groups, and non-governmental organizations can contribute to widows’ empowerment. Also, contributing to scholarship on a topic helps to identify and authenticate the problem, which in turn can produce solutions.

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In order to strengthen the interdisciplinary approach, this study employs the use of a mixed method to gain access to the widows’ opinions and attitudes. Repko and Szostak encourage interdisciplinary researchers to be open to both qualitative and quantitative approaches as both are useful in creating insights and knowledge.\textsuperscript{10} For instance, the use of survey questionnaires was useful in my analysis of the ways in which a Nigerian widow’s level of education intersects with the phenomena of widowhood. In addition, the use of interviews served, not only to strengthen and enhance the data from the survey questionnaires, but also to create the opportunity for twelve Nigerian widows to narrate their widowhood stories. Twenty widows took part in the survey questionnaires, out of which I interviewed twelve.

Selection of Participants

This section address two essential parts of my methodology: recruitment methods and the sample size. I recruited twenty Nigerian widows to take part in this mixed-method research and they provided the contextual data for this study. In addition, as widows are the focus of this research and have the requisite knowledge about widowhood experience, I chose to interview only widows. Guided by insights from other qualitative researchers such as Creswell and Kathy Charmaz, I chose a sample size of twelve widows to provide insight and a better understanding of resilience from their standpoints.

Several notable researchers have addressed qualitative sample size in their work. For instance, Creswell recommends three to ten participants for a phenomenological study while Greg Guest, Arwen Bunce, and Laura Johnson endorse twelve interviews as sufficient for research where the purpose is to understand shared perceptions and experiences among a group of individuals.\textsuperscript{11} All four scholars, however, agree that the concept of saturation is the most

\textsuperscript{10} Interdisciplinary Research, 61.
\textsuperscript{11} Creswell, A Concise Introduction to Mixed Methods Research, 77; Guest, Bunce, and Johnson, “How Many
important factor to consider in deciding on the issue of sample size in qualitative research. Sociologist and qualitative researcher Kathy Charmaz defines saturation as “the point at which the data collection process no longer offers any new or relevant data or fails to reveal new theoretical insights.” As the focus of this study is the resiliency of Nigerian widows, their perception of widowhood, and their diverse perspectives on coping mechanisms, I chose to conduct twelve interviews and my point of saturation as defined by Charmaz arrived at the tenth interview.

All participating widows were qualified to provide the data I sought to answer my research questions because they met my selection criteria: Nigerian widows who are aged between 18 to 65 years and can speak and write English. According to Kathryn Roulston, a qualitative method theorist, in order to use the phenomenological interview successfully, researchers must identify participants who have the necessary experience or knowledge related to the research topic and who will speak to that knowledge or experience. I employed the convenience sampling method to recruit the first two participants who volunteered to take part in the study. William Edmonds and Thomas Kennedy describe the convenience sampling method as one where the researcher selects individuals who are available and willing to participate. In this study, I initially recruited two widows from my personal network and later the two widows willingly assisted in recruiting other widows who potentially could take part in the survey and who met the criteria, a process that Edmonds and Kennedy describe as purposeful or criterion

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Both the snowball and the purposeful sampling recruitment method were critical to this study because they introduced widows from a diverse background who showed interest in participating in the research. David Silverman explains that the snowball sample in which the social networks of one or two initial informants can help recruit other potential and willing participants is a useful method in qualitative research.

One reason why I chose to use the snowball method of recruitment is because I currently reside in the United States and accessing Nigerian widows living in Nigeria would have been difficult for me to achieve. I was a bit apprehensive about finding widows who would be willing to take part in the survey and interview activity but the use of the snowball method led me to participants from different ethnic groups, ages, religions, and social status. All the participants were born in Nigeria and they were resident in Nigeria at the time the interviews took place.

A vital aspect of the qualitative interview was obtaining the IRB required informed consent from all participants. The purpose of an informed consent document is that it ensures interviewees are fully knowledgeable about the study they are about to take part in and that their participation is voluntary. Some key topics that the informed consent addresses include the duration of the interview, possible discomforts that interviewees may experience during the interview, and issues of confidentiality. I noted in the informed consents for both survey and interview participants that even though there was no direct benefit to them from taking part in the interview, their participation would be useful in several ways. First, it will contribute to future research on how some Nigerian widows cope with the social and cultural challenges they face as widows. Second, this information can help researchers, counselors, social workers, international

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17 See Appendix D for the IRB approved informed consent document that I used the interviews in this study.
organizations, and non-governmental organizations to better understand the influence of resilience on the health and well-being of widows in Nigeria. Third, their narratives can lend insight and shed light on why some of these harmful widowhood practices exist and how widows can learn to exercise strength and agency through resilience.

Qualitative Interviews

Although critics suggest that the use of interviews may introduce bias, lack validity, and may not be reliable as accurate or truthful accounts, Roulston maintains that interviews can be used productively if approached methodologically. In Reflective Interviewing, she points out “excerpts from interviews provide evidence for our claims.” Using interviews, I explored my claim that Nigerian widows are coping within the lived realities of their diverse social locations.

In InterView: Learning the Craft of Qualitative Research Interviews, Svend Brinkman and Steinar Kvale describe the research interview as a production site of knowledge, which is socially constructed by the interaction of interviewee and interviewer. However, as mentioned in Chapter 2, although knowledge is socially constructed, the knowledge produced from the standpoint of culturally and socially marginalized women (and other minority members) can provide knowledge that enables them to improve conditions of their lives.

Feminist sociologists Marjorie Devault and Glenda Gross describe interviews as a powerful research tool that explores marginalized women’s experiences and the different contexts under which they occur. Because this study concern women and how the conditions of their lives can improve even as they undergo harmful and adverse widowhood practices, the

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18 Reflective Interviewing, 2-3.
19 Ibid., 2.
interviews enable their standpoints and perspectives to emerge. Finally, Shari Stone-Mediatore points out that many social struggles and their “narratives of experience have raised awareness of and gained sympathy for little-known social struggles.”

According to Winsome Brayda and Travis Boyce, “qualitative interviewing begins with the assumption that the perspective of others is meaningful” and this insight guided all the interviews that I conducted. In addition, Jim Hopper, a psychologist and expert on trauma, maintains that during interviews, researchers empower participants by treating them with respect and giving them options and choices whenever possible. One way I applied Hopper’s insight was that at the end of each interview, I asked every widow “if she would like to add anything to the discussion” as a way to make her realize the importance of her perspective and contribution to the ongoing discourse on widowhood.

Through the use of Skype audio, I interviewed twelve widows between the ages of 18-65. Each widow told me when she would be available for interview and within four weeks, I was able to conclude all the interviews. Most of the interviews did not last for more than one hour to ensure that the participants did not tire of talking. However, a few participants’ interviews lasted a little longer because I felt it would be disrespectful to cut off the interviews at the end of an hour. Even though each widow responded to the same question from a prepared list of the IRB-approved questions, this did not prevent me from asking new questions that arose from the conversation.

Where appropriate, I used probes or follow-up questions to elicit more detailed and elaborate responses as well as to follow up on new information not initially covered in the list of questions. For instance, Mrs. A spoke about her in-laws, who shaved her armpit and pubic hair as part of the compulsory widowhood practices forced on her. After this revelation, I followed up with probes such as “please tell me more about your hair being shaved?” “Is this a common practice”? “How did it make you feel?.” For another widow, Mrs. C, who used the word “resilient” to describe herself, I probed further by asking her “please can you tell me what the word resilient means to you?.” The use of probes enabled me to clarify and explore the widows’ responses. I encouraged the interview participants to speak freely, and my use of open-ended questions made it easier for them to respond. Roulston points out that open-ended questions provide “broad parameters within which interviewees can formulate answers in their own words.” The first set of questions were warm-up questions centered on basic demographic information that aimed at building rapport between the interviewee and myself. Following the introductory questions were transition questions intended to understand each widow’s lived experience and to gain insight into their lives as women who have endured loss, trauma, and grief. This then led to my key research question, followed by closing questions.

In other to prevent any miscommunication or confusion during the interview, I worded all the interview questions in simple language so that each one had a clear meaning. For instance, the question “please can you tell me a little about yourself” was worded to demonstrate that although I did not require a lengthy life history, I did want the interviewee to tell me some vital information about herself to help me know her just a little bit better. I also avoided asking “why”

26 Ibid.
27 Please see a copy of the interview questions in Appendix B. Also see Appendix D for the IRB approved informed consent document that I used for the interviews in this study.
questions because the purpose of this interview was not to interrogate the participants but rather to give them the opportunity to tell their stories on their terms. I took care not to lead participants’ responses or influence their narratives, as the whole purpose was to document their perspectives and standpoints, not my own. Here, Brinkman and Kvale lend their insight when they explain that the interviewer should lead the subject towards specific themes but not to specific opinions about these themes. The following research questions guided the interview:

1. What are some of the effects of widowhood practices on Nigerian widows?
2. Do the narratives of Nigerian widows truly hold an epistemic advantage?
3. What key factors enable Nigerian widows to cope with and demonstrate resilience to detrimental and traumatic widowhood practices?
4. Does the social status of Nigerian widows affect their widowhood experiences and ability to demonstrate resilience?

**Survey Questionnaires**

I employed the use of survey questionnaires as a means of analyzing my research questions for two reasons. First, I sought to obtain a broader perspective and better understanding of adverse widowhood practices by documenting Nigerian widows’ opinions and attitudes about the social construction of widowhood practices. Secondly, the use of survey questionnaires helped me to assess the ways in which a Nigerian widow’s social status affects and intersects with her experience of widowhood. Although feminist methodology commonly favors qualitative interview techniques because they allow women to speak freely, Devault and Gross insist that researchers need various kinds of data to make their research objective. Through the use of surveys, I was able to ask a variety of questions that address the ways in which a widow’s

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28 *InterViews*, 34.
social status intersects with her experience of widowhood as well as how it affects her ability to cope.

Edmonds and Kennedy explain that researchers employ surveys to “observe trends, attitudes, or opinions of the population of interest” and to achieve this, I analyzed the survey results of widows with diverse backgrounds to discover the intersection of certain variables such as education, age, and religion within their subjective widowhood experience. On the issue of survey size, Edmonds and Kennedy state that because collecting data from an entire population is impossible, researchers should identify representatives of the individuals or groups that are the focus of the study and who are able to take part in the research. Keeping this in mind, I designed the survey questionnaire using Survey Monkey and then sent out invitations via email to two widows in my personal network, asking whether they would like to participate and also whether they knew any widows who would be willing to take part in my research. Based on the positive responses I received, I emailed the survey questionnaires to the potential participants, with the body of the email containing the informed consent form that each widow had to read and consent to first, before she could gain access to the questionnaire itself. Each question had a “prefer not to answer” option and I included this option not only to accentuate the voluntary nature of the process but also to empower the survey participants. I drafted the questions with clarity and precision using a language level that could be easily understood by all participants. In order to ensure that the participants’ personal information such as I.P addresses, names, and locations remained protected, I enabled the security features on Survey Monkey. The last query in the questionnaire asked if the survey participants would like me to interview them for my

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31 Ibid., 19-20.
32 A list of the survey questions can be found in Appendix C.
qualitative research. Based on the number of positive responses I received, I sent informed consent forms to the first twelve widows who indicated they would like to take part in the interview as my interview sample size was twelve. I made sure I explained to the remaining women about my study size and thanked them for taking part in the survey.

**Ethical Issues**

At every point in this study, I took care to keep ethical concerns at the forefront. Adhering to the highest standard of ethical behavior throughout one’s research reflects the researcher’s efforts to ensure her/his work achieves a high academic quality.\(^{33}\) My primary role as the principal investigator was to collate, analyze, and document emerging concepts and patterns of resilience in Nigerian widows in the most ethical way possible. Brinkman and Kvale warn, “Qualitative research can create tension between the wish to obtain knowledge and ethical concerns.”\(^{34}\) Researchers should then strive to strike a balance between asking personal and probing questions of the participant, but at the same time, they must remain mindful of the interviewee’s personal space, keeping in mind any chance of possible harm to the participant.

Throughout the interview process, I was mindful of the rights, confidentiality, privacy, and welfare of the participants in this research. Participants were made to feel comfortable and relaxed from the beginning of the interview while I maintained a respectful but professional distance. Brayda and Boyce warn that in trying to make interview participants comfortable, the interviewer must avoid forming friendships that may bias data selection.\(^{35}\) I made the interview participants comfortable at the beginning of the interview and got them to warm up by first introducing myself, telling them a little about the research, and then inviting the interviewees to

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\(^{33}\) Roulston, *Reflective Interviewing*, 85.

\(^{34}\) *Interviews*, 84.

\(^{35}\) “So you Really Want to Interview Me?,” 321.
tell me something about themselves that would help me get to know them a little better. One widow, Mrs. P, explained that to make ends meet, she learned how to make soap after she lost her husband.\textsuperscript{36} I found this very industrious and said so, to which she asked if she could send me some of the soap, but I politely and warmly told her “maybe after my project was finished.”\textsuperscript{37} This served as an icebreaker for the interview and helped to make the participant comfortable but more importantly, it established a rapport between us, which helped the interview to go more smoothly.

The participants all chose a time that was convenient for them to sit for their interview and even though there is a five-hour time difference between Nigeria and America, I made myself available. For instance, my interview with Mrs. E took place at 4 am US EST, which was 9 am in Nigeria at the time. On my part, I ensured I was prepared and in a private room with no distraction during each interview, as I did not want to disrupt the flow of the interviewee at any point. In addition, I took care to address each participant respectfully by greeting them “good afternoon Mrs. A” or “good evening Mrs. P” depending on the time of the day as that is the standard greeting in Nigeria. Mindful of the sensitive nature of my research, I provided the interviewees with a summary of the type of questions I would ask them.

Two participants asked to see the questions ahead of the interview and I respectfully obliged, as my aim was to make them feel comfortable during the interview. The women explained that seeing the questions before the interviews helped them to be better prepared for the interviews and it made them realize the sort of questions they would be answering.\textsuperscript{38} One of

\textsuperscript{36} Mrs. P, interview by Esosa Mohammed, via Skype audio, September 3, 2018.

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{38} It is pertinent to note here that in some cases, when interviewees see interview questions beforehand, it allows them to pre-edit possible responses.
them, Mrs. B, explained that she does not like surprises and that is why she requested to see the questions in advance. However, none of the women asked me to alter any of the questions.

The phenomenon that forms the basis of this resilience-based study is that of widowhood, and many will agree that this is a delicate issue, mainly because it deals with death, loss, and grief. In “A Researcher’s Journey: Exploring a Sensitive Topic with Vulnerable Women,” Christine Marsh, Jenny Browne, Jan Taylor, and Deborah Davis describe sensitive research as that which addresses issues that are deeply personal, private, stressful, controversial, and frightening. The authors maintain that empathy, respect, and reflexivity are some principles that researchers must take into consideration to ensure the participants are protected. Before the interviews, I addressed issues of anonymity, confidentiality, purpose of the research, possible risks, and storage of sensitive documents with the interviewees, and explained how I intend to use the data from the interview. By my doing so, the interviewees felt comfortable enough to give their consent in writing after this assurance. In line with the IRB’s guidelines, I ensured that I received the formal consent and approval of all the twelve interviewees before any of the interviews took place.

While the session was still clear in my mind, I transcribed each audio recording manually within twenty-four hours of each interview. Any references to the participants’ names were immediately replaced with pseudonyms during transcription to protect their personal identities, and I removed all identifying information and replaced them with key codes. Subsequently, I destroyed the audio recordings from interviews and sent copies of each participant’s transcripts

40 Ibid., 66.
41 The IRB approved Interview Consent Document and the Survey Consent Document can be found in Appendix D and E respectively.
to those who requested a copy for their records. The transcribed data formed the basis for my discussion and analysis in Chapter 5. For security purposes, I stored all notes and information such as informed consent documents and key codes in a password-protected file on my computer or locked in a cabinet in my possession.

**Feminist Interviews**

I relied on a feminist framework that advocates researchers should be cognizant of power hierarchies between the interviewer and the interviewee, and to treat interview participants with utmost respect and sensitivity. Both Roulston and Hesse-Biber discuss the importance of the feminist interview as a means to produce knowledge. According to Roulston, feminist interviews allow women’s voices to be heard in an ethical and respectful manner because ultimately, feminist research seeks to contribute to the advancement of women’s causes in a patriarchal, capitalist society.\(^{42}\) Implicit in feminist interviews is the theory that women have been silenced or ignored, so that creating the opportunity to tell their stories empowers them and produces new knowledge in the process. In “The Practice of Feminist In-Depth Interviewing,” Hesse-Biber explains that one of the aims of feminist interviews is to extrapolate the “subjugated knowledge” that lies hidden and unarticulated within the realities of women’s lives.\(^{43}\) However, Hesse-Biber cautions that in obtaining the necessary data, researchers need to be aware of the role they play in the interview process and be mindful of their particular personal and research standpoints.\(^{44}\) As I emphasized in Chapter 1, I have put my best effort throughout this research to minimize bias or personal assumptions in other for me to reduce the element of bias as much as possible in the findings.

\(^{42}\) *Reflective Interviewing*, 23.
\(^{43}\) “The Practice of Feminist In-Depth Interviewing,” 113.
\(^{44}\) Ibid., 114.
Throughout this study, I ensured that I presented the voices of the twelve widows insightfully by documenting and acknowledging their diverse standpoints. During the interviews, I paid close attention to the narratives of the widows, making sure that I did not miss anything that was said because, as Roulston notes, excellent listening skills will be useful in determining whether or not the research topics and questions have been addressed by the participant.\textsuperscript{45} In addition, Devault and Gross state that not actively listening during an interview could have the “transformative potential” of affecting the data and knowledge being produced and may also result in the researcher hearing only what s/he wants to or expects to hear.\textsuperscript{46} Even though my main purpose of conducting these interviews was to discover the coping mechanisms used by Nigerian widows in response to harmful widowhood practices, I did not allow this to dominate all aspects of the interview process. Instead, I encouraged the interview participants to speak and share their emotions as they saw fit.

The researcher’s primary job, according to Hesse-Biber, is to “listen carefully, discerningly, and intently to the comments of the researched.”\textsuperscript{47} Applying these insights to my research proved invaluable, as it enabled me to obtain the necessary data required to analyze my research questions. For instance, listening closely to the participants’ narratives as they shared their widowhood experience helped to build my understanding of how some Nigerian widows exercised agency and spoke up for themselves even as they faced hostile in-laws who imposed adverse cultural practices on them. I also heard some of the widows recount happy memories even as they described their traumatic widowhood experience. For instance, Mrs. E nostalgically talked about how she met her husband and how happy it made her feel to be able to recollect

\textsuperscript{45} \textit{Reflective Interviewing}, 15.
\textsuperscript{46} “Feminist Interviewing: Experience, Talk, and Knowledge,” 182.
\textsuperscript{47} “The Practice of Feminist In-Depth Interviewing,” 134.
those memories. With verbal encouragement like ‘Uh huh’, ‘yes’ and ‘wow,” I stayed focused on the interviewee’s response, showing that I was actively following her story.

**A Trauma-Informed Approach**

As I mentioned in Chapter 1 and discussed again in Chapter 2, the death of a spouse is profoundly personal and can be traumatic. One of the purposes of the interview process was to discover how Nigerian widows deal with the traumatic experience of harmful widowhood practices and what gives rise to resilient capacities in the widows that enable them to cope and begin to heal. This section addresses the value of talking through trauma, avoiding re-traumatizing the interviewee, and different trauma-sensitive approaches that the interviewer can adopt. The research on trauma highlights some of the value in talking through traumatic experience as a step towards fostering healing and resilience in individuals who have undergone trauma. Psychologist Patricia Kerig underscores the significance of “allowing trauma-related thoughts and emotions to emerge through consciousness rather than suppressing or fleeing from them.”

According to Kerig, talking through one’s trauma can serve to enhance one’s capacity for resilience.

Brinkman and Kvale trace the process of using interviews to produce new knowledge in individuals who have experienced trauma back to Sigmund Freud’s “historically significant” psychoanalytical theory. One of his patients, twenty-one-year-old Anna, suffered trauma from the death of her father, but Freud discovered that “her verbal utterance completely relieved her

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48 Mrs. E, interview by Esosa Mohammed, via Skype audio on September 2, 2018.
50 Ibid., 8.
mind. As Stephen Thornton explains, Freud’s method of “free association” (also known as a “talking cure”) served as a means to encourage his patients to speak freely and uninhibitedly. Thornton further explains that for Freud, “an unconscious mental process or event was not one which merely happens to be out of consciousness at a given time, but rather one which could not, except through protracted psychoanalysis, be brought to the forefront of consciousness. In other words, the process of talking about one’s experience to another enables certain thoughts and emotions to emerge and can result in an improved physical and mental state. This insight still forms the basis of several trauma-informed studies today.

Although it is beneficial to share and talk about traumatic experiences, it is also vital that in the process, the interviewee does not get re-traumatized. According to psychologist Jim Hopper, there is a critical need for researchers to meet the emotional needs of interview participants who have experienced trauma. Stephanie Covington, defines re-traumatization as the psychological experience of triggering an individual who has undergone trauma previously into making a distressed response. In other to prevent re-traumatization, or at least reduce the emotional impact, Covington advises researchers to take the trauma into account, do all they can to make research subjects feel safe, and avoid generating a sudden emotional outburst from interviewees. Likewise, Dominick LaCapra also emphasizes the critical need for researchers to

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52 Brinkman and Kvale, InterViews, 29-33.
54 Ibid., 5.
55 Some feminist philosophers have criticized Freud’s psychoanalysis theory as detrimental to women. See Hannah Lerman, “From Freud to Feminist Personality Theory: Getting Here from There,” Psychology of Women Quarterly 10, no. 1-18 (February 2016).
56 “Post-Training Handout,” 8.
58 Ibid., 377.
be responsive to the traumatic experiences of their subjects.\textsuperscript{59} Keeping these insights in mind, I sought to avoid re-traumatizing the interviewees by being sensitive as I asked the interview questions, aware that some of the women became widows as recently as seven to twelve months.

Given the traumatic experience of losing a loved one and the sociocultural oppression that Nigerian widows face by virtue of their gender, I took particular care to in asking certain questions so as not to bring up old hurts and pain. Aware that some of my questions such as “please can you tell me how you lost your husband” were sensitive, I made sure to begin each interview by first telling the women that the question may make them uncomfortable or emotional and if they did not want to answer the question, it was perfectly fine to pause or stop altogether. If, however, they chose to go on to answer it, they could stop at any time, pause, take a short break, or stop completely. Except for one widow who opted not to answer this question because she said it brought up very sad memories for her, the other eleven widows said they were fine with answering the question. As they shared their stories, I thanked them for sharing their experience with me and expressed deep sympathy for their loss.

I adopted a trauma-informed approach in order to ensure the interviewees felt emotionally safe and secure enough to allow them share their personal experiences with me. Throughout the interviews, I paid close attention to the participants’ expressions of trauma and took care to ensure that my questions did not re-traumatize the participants as I posed each question. Nonetheless, despite my best efforts, some of the participants did become emotional as they shared their experience of losing their husbands as well as the traumatic experience of widowhood practices and where this happened, we always paused or took a break before carrying on with the interview.

\textsuperscript{59} Writing History, Writing Trauma, 41.
Researchers strive to avoid re-traumatizing interview participants during the interview, but they must also be able to manage their own emotions during the interview process as Hopper notes. He explains that researchers need to be mindful of their demeanor while the interview is taking place and they must first assess the level of their own emotions in advance of the interview.\textsuperscript{60} Before the interviews commenced, I was aware that the personal narratives of the widows I was interviewing could trigger both their emotions and my own as a widow who also has experienced loss. Consequently, I took some time to explore my own emotional state to be certain that I was prepared to conduct the interviews without becoming overwhelmed in the middle of an interview. I also spoke to a trauma expert who gave me some advice on self-care such as to remain calm when interviewees share difficult or emotional aspects of their story and to take a break if I felt I needed to at any point, rather than break down in the middle of the interview. I also found that writing my personal feelings in a journal before and after each interview helped me to process my emotions.

The Phenomenological Interview

From the outset, the primary aim of this study was to gather data regarding the diverse perspectives of research participants (in this case twelve Nigerian widows) about the phenomena of adverse widowhood practices in Nigeria and to learn from the widows the meaning they make of these practices. Based on the concept of phenomenology as a research paradigm that focuses both on the phenomenon under study and the daily experience of those who undergo these practices, I identified a phenomenological methodology as the best style for this research.

As discussed in Chapter 1, the theme of widows’ resilience in Nigeria is a relatively new, largely unresearched area that this study seeks to augment. Inspired by phenomenology, my

\textsuperscript{60} “Post-Training Handout,” 12.
interview included questions such as “please can you describe the key factors that enabled you to
demonstrate resilience despite all you went through as a widow?,”61 “please can you describe
how your town treats women who lose their husbands?,”62 and probes such as “please can you
tell me how being educated helped you to cope with widowhood practices?.” My aim in
constructing these interview questions was to obtain a comprehensive and deeper understanding
of the social phenomena of adverse widowhood practices from the widows’ unique perspective,
to learn through the participants’ experiences ways in which she coped and resources she
depended on, and exactly how those resources helped her to cope. By facilitating the opportunity
for Nigerian widows to describe their diverse widowhood experiences, their coping and survival
strategies emerged, with implications for Nigerian widows’ agency and empowerment.

Brinkman and Kvale point out that throughout the history of psychology, qualitative interviews
have been a key method for producing scientific and professional knowledge.63 In addition to
psychologists, social scientists and anthropologists also employ the use of interviews in their
research as a means to obtain tangible insights into the nuanced everyday lives of the individual
or group under study. Through the use of interviews, this study therefore seeks to learn more
about resilience in Nigerian widows, the meaning they make out of their widowhood
experiences, how they deal with the trauma of loss and widowhood practices, and the internal
and external factors that enable them to cope.

**Narrative Analysis**

Narrative analysis is an interdisciplinary research tool that focuses on stories encased
within larger narratives. The use of narrative analysis allow researchers to analyze interviewees’

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61 See Interview questions in Appendix B.
62 Ibid.
63 *InterViews*, 12.
experience in a way that produces new knowledge and a better understanding of the phenomena under study. According to Jean Clandinin and Jean Huber, most narrative inquiries begin with asking participants to tell their stories by engaging in a dialogue. The use of narrative analysis aided me in examining the diverse experiences and stories each participant shared through their interviews. Edmonds and Kennedy explain that individuals or groups live storied lives and therefore the authors define narrative analysis as the study of the diverse ways people experience the world. According to Brinkman and Kvale, narrative analysis focuses on the meaning and linguistic form of interview stories. The result of narrative analysis is an understanding of the phenomena under study, as the researcher develops a clearer understanding of the different ways in which interview participants experience the world through the stories they tell. Thinking narratively about the phenomena throughout the qualitative process highlights the shifting, changing, personal, and social nature of the phenomena under study. All the widows shared their stories, and each narrative provided new ways in which to understand the basis for widowhood practices, new knowledge of how they cope, and new theories on female agency and social change. These narratives also serve to create new insights and produce knowledge that is relevant to my research and helpful in answering the questions that I set out to answer because, as Catherine Riessman maintains, “narratives provide windows into lives that confront the restraints of circumstances.” I also used narrative analysis to discover the impact of cultural

66 InterViews, 253.
67 “Narrative Inquiry,’’ 9.
practices on widows in Nigeria, the ways in which they interpret their experience, the meaning they make of their social location, and their attempts to cope with the challenges they face.

In a study which focused on the lives of uprooted and displaced girls in Canada, Helen Berman, Gloria Mulcachy, Cheryl Forchuk, Kathryn Edmonds, Amy Haldenby, and Raquel Lopez employed narrative analysis and open-ended questions to carry out in-depth interviews in other to explore their unique perspectives and opinions. The team of researchers applied narrative analysis to explore the lived experience of nineteen girls who had been uprooted and displaced. Through their stories, the authors sought to understand the ways in which their individual social location shaped their overall sense of well-being. In their results, the researchers discover the challenges and barriers that the participants encounter concerning uprooting and displacement. In the same process, their interview stories reveal much about strength, courage, and hope.

Adding her perspective on narrative analysis, Margaret Sandelowski asserts that through the use of narrative methods, researchers can gain insight into the ways human beings understand and enact their lives through stories.” I used narrative analysis to gain insights on distinct moments in the participants’ lives. For instance, in her interview, Mrs. Q described the moment when she first met her husband, the life they lived together as a married couple, how he died, the burial ceremony, and then the moment when some women approached her so they could shave her hair. Mrs. Q’s response to them was “when my husband was alive, he cherished my hair

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70 Ibid., 421.
71 Ibid., 427.
73 Mrs. Q, interview by Esosa Mohammed, via Skype audio, September 10, 2018.
and so nothing would make me cut the hair.”

Mrs. Q’s narrative revealed much about her social settings, her recollection of the life she lived with her husband while he was alive, and gaining strength from those memories to exercise agency. As Clandinin and Huber observe, “much possibility exists for social change as well as for the creation of shifted sociocultural and institutional narratives.” In other words, stories told by interviewees contain insights that can reveal hidden ways in which some Nigerian widows resist patriarchal interpretations of tradition and in doing so, gain agency and empower themselves.

**Coding**

Coding is the process of identifying, organizing, and categorizing the critical points from research data in order to analyze the research questions. Johnny Saldana defines coding as a word or short phrase that captures the essence or salient attribute of data from interview transcripts, field notes, or questionnaires. The issue of what is important in the data ultimately rests on the researcher and the research questions. Saldana describes coding as more of an interpretive act than a precise science. During the process of transcribing the audio recordings, I formed the habit of taking notes, and I found this to be very effective and helpful for my coding because, as Saldana maintains, doing so provides an analytic opportunity to organize and reorganize the codes into categories and sub-categories. After I had manually transcribed all the audio recordings, I began the process of coding. First, guided by my theoretical framework and research questions, I identified the major themes in the first participant’s interview. Second, I

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74 Mrs. Q, interview.
75 “Narrative Inquiry,” 17.
77 Ibid., 4.
78 Ibid., 21.
looked for similar themes and responses in the other interviews. I carefully noted themes that emerged from the widows’ narratives, noting those that supported my position. However, I noted not only themes that would answer my questions, but also those that did not support my position or my sense of the emerging patterns. Hesse-Biber refers to the sociologist David Karp, who insists “negative cases” that do not fit cohesively or that create problems for one’s research must be taken into consideration in analysis. Karp’s insight on negative data helped to ensure that I relayed the experience of participants accurately. As I mentioned earlier, I embarked on this study because of the research gap on widows’ resilience and how they cope with adverse widowhood practices. While I looked out for recurring themes on resilience and the impact of cultural practices in the widows’ narratives, I also noted other emerging themes such as relationships with in-laws that further served to strengthen my research even more. I did not allow my agenda to dominate the research process because as Hesse-Biber observes, this can result in a failure to acknowledge powerful emotions from participant’s narratives. I also relied on previous studies that researched the factors that enable widows to cope in adverse circumstances using qualitative methods.

The results from the twelve interviews, as well as the analysis of the twenty survey questionnaires, form the basis of the next chapter. I use diagrams and graphs to present my findings. With the interviewees’ permission, quotes and excerpts from the interviews form part of the analysis in the next chapter. In addition, I took into consideration that these women were

79 “The Practice of Feminist In-Depth Interviewing,” 145.
80 Ibid., 134.
sharing their personal experiences with me and except for one of them, they had never shared or thought to share their experience with anyone and this led me to demonstrate utmost care and empathy throughout the interview process.

It is vital to note here that I use the terms “story” and “narratives” interchangeably in my analysis below to refer to the widows’ expressions of their lived experiences. According to Mithra Moezzi, Kathryn Janda, and Sea Rotmann, “stories and narratives let researchers speak and inquire differently, they provide a different set of data and voices, and they let go of some rigid notions of truth.”\textsuperscript{82} The personal stories and narratives in this study embody the individual and collective contexts that shape the social realities of research subjects and as psychologist Jerome Bruner insists, they are “recipes for constructing experience.”\textsuperscript{83} As a researcher, I am aware of the possibility that in recounting stories, participants may succumb to embellishment. Holocaust survivor and author, Primo Levi explains that some stories have undergone “countless verbal versions” and may become “retouched” with each recount to elicit certain reactions.\textsuperscript{84} This is not to say that such stories are not fundamentally accurate, but rather the narrator has enhanced the story over time. However, as I mentioned above, the stories in this study have not been shared with anyone and I have done my best to present them as they were narrated.


CHAPTER 5

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

I conducted twenty surveys as a means to gain insight into the intersection between the participants’ demographics and their unique widowhood experiences. I also sought to discover whether there was a correlation between their social status and their ability to demonstrate resilience. Lastly, I designed the survey questionnaire using the Survey Monkey program to uncover the attitude and opinions of twenty Nigerian widows towards the phenomena of widowhood and its practices.

Survey Results

Table 1 reflects the widows’ diverse status in terms of their age, ethnic group, religion, and level of education. Among the survey participants, eleven of them were between the ages of 55 and 65. One participant preferred not to divulge her age group. Secondly, out of twenty, nine of the widows were Ibo, followed by five Edo women. Here also, one participant preferred not to identify her ethnic group. As the table shows, almost all the widows were Christians, with one widow identifying as Muslim. The results also show that almost all the widows were educated on varying levels with a master’s degree as the highest educational qualification and an ordinary national diploma or higher national diploma as the lowest level of education.¹ One widow indicated that she was not formally educated.

¹ The Ordinary National Diploma (OND) or Higher National Diploma (HND) is a certificate that is awarded by a Polytechnic in Nigeria. An OND is the equivalent of a high school diploma in the United States while the HND is the equivalent of a college diploma in the United States.
Table 1. Widows’ socio-demographic characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Ethnic Group</th>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>Education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>55-65 (11)</td>
<td>Ibo - 9</td>
<td>Christianity - 19</td>
<td>Masters - 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41-55 (5)</td>
<td>Yoruba - 4</td>
<td>Islam - 1</td>
<td>BSc – 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26-40 (3)</td>
<td>Edo - 5</td>
<td>OND/HND - 6</td>
<td>No Formal Education - 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Akwa Ibom - 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 below shows some of the cultural practices and mourning rites that are more commonly identified in the widowhood literature by scholars. More than half of the widows indicated in their survey questionnaires that they had experienced at least one or more of these widowhood practices. For instance, ten out of the twenty widows indicated that they had to stay indoors for a designated period, wearing black mourning outfits. In addition, twelve out of the twenty widows also indicated that as they transitioned into widowhood, they did not get any support from their in-laws. Also, table 2 shows that of the prevailing widowhood practices prevalent in Nigerian societies today, making widows drink the water used in washing the body of the deceased may no longer be as common as it was a few years ago, because none of the survey participants indicated that this happened to them.

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3 Here, “did not get any support from in-laws” refer to emotional or financial support.
4 Though a significant finding, given the small sample size, I recommend that this finding should be corroborated using a larger sample size.
Table 2. Widowhood practices in Nigeria

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Widowhood Practices</th>
<th>Number of Widows</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Did not get any support from in-laws</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confined indoors for a certain period</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wore dark colored clothes</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shaved hair</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was not allowed to inherit husband’s property (vehicle, house, etc.)</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slept in the same room with the deceased</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drank water used to wash the deceased’s body</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 below reflects the opinion of the widows and their attitudes toward education and research. Although most of the widows were educated to some level, fourteen of them indicated that being educated increased their ability to demonstrate resilience in stressful and traumatic environments. Also, all twenty widows welcomed my research on Nigerian widows’ well-being.
Table 3. Widows’ opinion and attitude

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Question</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Prefer Not to Answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In your opinion, did your level of education increase your resilience?</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In your opinion, do you think there is a need for research into widows’ well-being?</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discussion

The widows’ responses to the survey questionnaire largely reveals the way their social status intersects with their unique widowhood experiences. In addition, their responses also reflect the far-reaching influence of widowhood practices and ways in which it operates to oppress widows. In response to question five of the questionnaire, nineteen of the widows identified as Christian and one as Muslim. In the same vein, the widows responded to the question of education by indicating the various educational levels they had reached. Except for one widow, all were educated. Nevertheless, it appears that several widows who identified as Christians and were educated were not free from the demands of widowhood practices.
Figure 1. Widowhood and religion

Figure 2. Widowhood and level of education
The results from figure 2 above challenges the work of scholars who contend that a widow’s level of education and work status determines the intensity of the rites her in-laws subject her to. For instance, in a study by Aransiola Oyeniyi and Ayodeji Ige in which they sought to determine whether the rites Nigerian widows experienced varied due to their social status, the authors concluded that intensity differs across these social statuses, and the higher the women’s status, the less intense the rites she observed. The authors stressed education as a barrier to a widow’s experience but this study show otherwise as more than half of the interviewees’ were educated in varying degrees but nevertheless were made to undergo traditional widowhood practices.

5 “Widowhood Practices Among the Yorubas of South West Nigeria,” 3164-3165.
The respondents’ answers are also crucial to my discussion of religion and widowhood practices, with 19 of the 20 widows identifying as Christians. My analysis in the literature review shows that some scholars believe widowhood practices are embedded in spiritual beliefs, which in turn are grounded in traditional religious beliefs. This contention, however, raises the question of what role adherents to contemporary religion play in the way a woman experiences widowhood.

The results of the survey also showed that over half of the widows were educated to varying degrees and that fourteen of the widows felt that their education helped them to cope with widowhood challenges, and even increased their resilience. These results again raise the following questions: what were the different ways in which the widows’ level of education helped in increasing their ability to cope with widowhood challenges? Did education have any impact on their ability to exercise agency, or not? Lastly, more than half of the widows indicated that they did not receive any support from their in-laws and this also raises questions such as “what kind of support?” “Was it emotional, financial or both?” The section that follows below analyzes these linkages further and synthesize the results of the survey and interviews in a way that qualitatively enhances the results of the survey questionnaires, providing a deeper and better understanding of the questions raised here.

**Interview Results**

**The Phenomenon of Widowhood in Nigeria**

The twelve interviewees individually shared their widowhood trajectories, describing their unique experiences, its effects on them, and the way they consider they are perceived in society. Mrs. A stated, “Widowhood is another level of life. It is an eye opener into another

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world.” All the participants subjectively described widowhood as a painful and highly emotional experience, using different terms. However, although the women’s perception of widowhood and their individual narratives were influenced by their different circumstances and social locations, all the widows stated in one way or another that widowhood indeed was a surreal experience for them. As Mrs. S describes, “Everything came like a dream. I wasn’t sure of the things I ought to do and the things I ought not to do.” Mrs. E recounts, “When I lost my husband, I felt naked, exposed, and vulnerable, bare before other people.”

Mrs. K spoke about the stigma that society attaches to widows and widowhood in Nigeria. For instance, Mrs. K explained that “no man wants to marry me because I am a widow. Even if he is interested, other people will discourage him by asking if he knows whether she killed her husband.” Another widow, Mrs. J, also stated that in Nigeria, men and women see a widow as an “unfortunate being.” Mrs. J noticed that all her friends ran away from her and nobody wanted to come near her. Mrs. S sums up her experience as “very painful,” adding that “it’s even worse when your in-laws now add to it.”

One theme that runs through several of the interviews includes hostility from their in-laws after the loss of their husbands. All twelve interview participants spoke of initially having cordial relations with their in-laws, but nine recall that this changed as soon as their spouses passed on. When describing the relationship with her in-laws as a married woman, Mrs. A stated: “my relationship with my in-laws was the envy of other people. It was good. Some people did not even know I was married into the family. They thought I was my mother-in-law’s

7 Mrs. A, interview by Esosa Mohammed, via Skype audio, September 3, 2018.
8 Mrs. S, interview by Esosa Mohammed, via Skype audio, August 27, 2018.
9 Mrs. E, Interview by Esosa Mohammed, via Skype audio on September 2, 2018.
10 Mrs. K, interview by Esosa Mohammed, via Skype audio, September 7, 2018
11 Mrs. J, interview by Esosa Mohammed, via Skype audio, August 26, 2018.
12 Ibid.
13 Mrs. S, Interview.
daughter.”

Nevertheless, Mrs. S, who also described the relationship with her in-laws as friendly originally, states that their attitude towards her changed after the death of her husband. She recalled that during the burial of her husband, her in-laws were very hostile to her: “They weren’t nice or friendly. They kept to themselves. They weren’t coming to greet or console me. They were just behaving abnormally and you could see the hostility from their body language.”

Another widow, Mrs. J, stated that her relationship with her in-laws was very good at the beginning “but that was my assumption and it turned out to be wrong.” The widows shared their subjective insights on the emotional and mental effect of widowhood that is compounded by society’s perception of widows as “unfortunate beings,” “unlucky,” and their in-law’s unreceptive attitudes towards them as they transitioned into widowhood. However, the passing away of the widows’ husbands may be responsible for this change in attitude, as the narratives below show.

**Cultural Rites and Trauma**

Although this study focuses on coping and resilience, it also investigates the sociocultural contexts that ground the discussion of how Nigerian widows demonstrate resilience. When I asked if the widows had to carry out any cultural practices following the deaths of their husbands, most, but not all, responded in the affirmative. Four out of the twelve women whom I interviewed gave different reasons why they were not subject to any cultural practices. Mrs. O, whose husband’s family is from the Eastern part of Nigeria stated, “Fortunately for me, with Christianity in my area, we don’t practice such and they don’t maltreat widows or impose

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14 Mrs. A, Interview.
15 Mrs. S, interview.
16 Ibid.
17 Mrs. J, interview.
mourning rites.” Likewise, Mrs. U, who was less than thirty years old when her husband passed away, also stated in her interview that she did not undergo any mourning rites because her brothers-in-law stood by her and insisted that she should not be subjected to those rites. Mrs. U explained that another reason why her in-laws did not make her go through any mourning rites may have been because her husband did not marry her according to the Nigerian customary tradition.

Mrs. H also said her in-laws did not ask her to perform any cultural or mourning rites, but Mrs. C had a different story. She was in her mid-thirties when her husband passed away, and although she was not asked to carry out any rites, she nevertheless took it upon herself and went ahead to cut her hair, wear black clothes for three months, and confine herself indoors for a particular period of time. She said,

I did that because I know it is one of their requirements. They would have cut my hair in the way they wanted and I didn’t want to give anybody the opportunity to scrape my hair. I didn’t do it to please anybody. I did it myself to honor my husband’s memory and also to prevent anyone from coming near me to ask that I cut my hair, because that would touch on my emotions.

Nevertheless, the remaining eight widows described demeaning and adverse mourning rites and cultural practices that their in-laws and clan members put them through. For instance, Mrs. E, whose husband passed on less than two years ago, explained that from 12 midnight up to 4.30 a.m. in the morning, her husband’s clan members asked her to sit on leaves on the ground in a

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18 Mrs. O, interview by Esosa Mohammed, via Skype audio, August 18, 2018.
19 Mrs. U, interview by Esosa Mohammed, via Skype audio, August 19, 2018. One of the customary traditions dictates that the groom’s family pays a dowry to the bride’s family and after that the couple receives the blessings and approval of both their parents. Where the man does not pay the dowry, the woman is usually not fully accepted by her in-laws. See Ezejiofor, “Patriarchy, Marriage, and the Rights of Widows in Nigeria,” 145-146.
20 Mrs. C, interview by Esosa Mohammed, via Skype audio, September 3, 2018.
21 Clan members as used here refers to members of one’s extended family. For instance, the husband’s extended family.
black outfit without moving about. Afterwards, they asked her to go outside to take a bath and then walk back into the building naked, making sure that nobody saw her doing this. I asked her, “Did you ask why they wanted you to do this?” She replied that when she asked her in-laws, they told her that it was to sever the bond from her late husband so that she could remarry if she wanted to in the future. They also told her that if she did not carry out these acts, she would never be allowed to cook for her children.

One widow spoke of her in-laws’ refusal to believe that she was innocent in the death of her husband and her narrative provides some insight into the hostile and unsupportive behavior of some in-laws. Mrs. A revealed that her in-laws accused her of killing her husband, even though he had been ill for a few months before he passed on. Mrs. A explained further:

In our own part of the state, when one loses her husband, they feel that it is not right, maybe that woman is evil and that is why the husband died before her. They don’t like it when the husband dies before the woman. They feel it’s the woman that killed the husband. So, from that moment that they heard of the death of their brother, it was like war. They said I must prove that I am not the one that killed my husband, and that they are not buying my story that he was sick.

Another theme that emerged from the widows’ interviews is the active role that female members of the deceased’s family play in imposing adverse widowhood practices. Mrs. A described how a group of women known as *Umu adas* shaved off the hair on her head, armpits, and pubic region. The *Umu adas* also told that as part of her mourning rites for her late husband, she would not take a bath for three days, she must sit on the floor, she could only eat from dirty pots, she must eat alone, and she must wear black clothes for a period of one year. Following up on

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22 Mrs. E, interview by Esosa Mohammed, via Skype audio, September 2, 2018.
23 Mrs. E, interview.
24 Mrs. A, interview.
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid. *Umu ada* are the sisters or female relatives of the widow’s late husband whose role is often to ensure that the widow complies with the demands of culture. See Pemunta, “The Social Context of Widowhood Rites and Women’s Human Rights in Cameroun,” 2.
27 Mrs. A, interview.
what she told me, I asked her, “Did you think it was strange that it was women who were the
ones carrying out these practices on you?” She replied, “They told me that they too had endured
the same practices when they lost their own husbands and that it will be a taboo if the culture
were to die in our own time. Therefore, the practice must continue.”

Another widow also revealed that her in-laws accused her of being responsible for her
husband’s death. Mrs. P’s in-laws took her children away from her for a week, and they shaved
her hair and made her sit on the ground for so long that she fell sick in the process. One of her
late husband’s relatives told her that the only way she would be looked after was if she agreed to
become his wife, but she refused outright. Mrs. A also shares her experience: “as a widow, I
was treated like an animal and the belief is that being treated this way will force you to confess
that you are the one that killed your husband.” Mrs. A told me her husband was ill for some
time before he passed away.

Mrs. B shares a similar experience to that of Mrs. P. According to Mrs. B, after she had
mourned her late husband for six months by wearing only two dark-colored outfits, not cooking
for herself, and staying indoors for six months, her in-laws drove her out of her marital home
together with her two children because she refused to marry her late husband’s brother. In these
narratives, the gendered trauma that some Nigerian widows undergo as a result of sociocultural
practices and superstitious beliefs begin to emerge, supporting Meera Atkinson’s view that
patriarchy perpetuates trauma and gives rise to a multitude of sufferings and strife in women’s
lives. The social and cultural settings in Nigeria is male-dominated and this affects almost

28 Mrs. A, interview.
29 Mrs. P, interview by Esosa Mohammed, via Skype audio, September 3, 2018.
30 Ibid.
31 Mrs. A, interview.
32 Ibid.
33 Mrs. B, interview by Esosa Mohammed, via Skype audio, September 7, 2018.
34 “Patriarchy Perpetuates Trauma,” 3.
every area, including widowhood. Here, the widow’s right to grieve and to remain single or not after her husband’s death is impinged on by patriarchal beliefs that a widow can be inherited like a piece of property. Also note-worthy is the fact that more often than not, women serve as agents of patriarchy by enforcing these adverse practices. Several scholars such as Mary Nwogu, Amobi Ilika, Uche Ilika, and Ngambouk Pemunta have pointed out this paradox in their individual studies.\(^{35}\) However, Ngambouk, a sociologist insists that although women do administer these practices on other widows, “their actions are endorsed by the patriarchal order.”\(^{36}\) The oppression of women by women challenges and unsettles the national and global struggle for gender equality simply because of the idea that some women act as agents of patriarchy, thus helping to maintain a hegemonic sociocultural order.

**Widows’ Perception of Widowhood Rites and Practices**

Stephanie Covington, a gender trauma expert, argues that “gender shapes the contexts in which women live,” and the effects are often unseen.\(^{37}\) Some of the widows vividly described the often unseen and hidden aspects of widowhood practices, such as the emotional and psychological turmoil they bring. For instance, to ask a widow to prove she was not responsible for her husband’s death, to make her sit on the floor and eat from dirty dishes, and to render her homeless because she refuses to allow her brother-in-law to inherit her invariably affects a woman’s social, emotional, physical, and psychological well-being.

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According to Patricia Hill Collins, the concept of family or home should convey security for all members of that family and serve as a sanctuary for them, but for some Nigerian widows, this is not always the case. In order to discover the way the widows felt about these practices, I asked them to tell me how they would have preferred to be treated at the time they lost their husbands, and most of their answers were similar: It would have been nice to receive words of encouragement and comfort from their in-laws rather than accusations and malice. Mrs. P said she would have preferred that her in-laws were a source of strength to her, but instead the only strength she had then was from God. Mrs. A said she would have appreciated her in-laws empathizing with her, praying with her, and encouraging her as she mourned her husband. She continued: ‘I would have been glad if my in-laws helped me to take care of my children, allowed me to stay in my husband’s house, and did not drive us away.” The widows used the opportunity to express the different ways in which they would have preferred to be treated as they transitioned into widowhood.

Another question that I posed to the widows was “Do men receive the same treatment when they lose their wives?” I asked this question to discover whether the same mourning rites and rules applied to both widows and widowers, or if they were simply reserved for the women. I also wanted to discover whether the widowhood cultural practices were gendered in nature as indicated in some of the literature on widowhood, and I received a range of responses to this question. The consensus among the widows was that widowhood practices were unfair, as only women were made to shave their hair, wear black compulsorily, sit on the floor, bathe outside naked, and so on. Mrs. E’s response was as follows: “African tradition regards women as the

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38 “It’s All in the Family,” 67.
39 Mrs. P, Interview.
40 Mrs. A, interview.
41 Ibid.
weaker sex and subordinate. It’s unfair. They empathize with the man but not the woman. Men do not go through rites.”

Mrs. S was of the opinion that “it is outright discrimination which is aimed at lowering women’s self-esteem.”

In a qualitative study on dehumanizing widowhood rites and practices and their negative consequences on women’s well-being, Ngambouk Pemunta and Mathias Alubafi observe the different social and cultural rules that apply to some African widowers and go on to conclude that “these superstitious actions are geared to the oppression of the widow.” In this study, all the widows that I interviewed were of the opinion that widowhood practices in Nigeria were restricted to women, subjecting them to demeaning and sometimes harmful acts, while widowers were encouraged to move on quickly by remarrying as soon as possible. Mrs. C described widowhood practices as a “form of bullying” while Mrs. P exclaimed, “I would say it’s just wickedness and they call that culture.”

**Key Factors That Enable Nigerian Widows to Demonstrate Resilience and Strength**

My principal argument, as stated in earlier sections of this study is that despite the stress, adversity, and trauma Nigerian widows undergo, they are capable of reconstructing and rebuilding their lives. To support my claim, I then set out to investigate themes of resilience and strength through the lived experience of twelve Nigerian widows. In response to my question of what key factors enabled all them to cope as they faced one of the most emotionally challenging periods of their life, all the interview respondents identified multiple factors that they relied on to

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42 Mrs. E, interview.
43 Mrs. S, interview.
45 Mrs. C, interview; Mrs. P, interview.
cope and survive. The interview data revealed five distinct ways the participants cope with stress and build resilience.

**Faith and Belief in God**

All the widows identified their faith in God as the primary source of support in dealing with the loss of their spouse as well as enduring traumatic practices that some of them were put through. Lucinda Roff, Daniel Durkin, Fei Sun, and David Klemmack express the view that spiritual resources can help an individual to cope with an on-going stressor, leading to more positive emotions and well-being.\(^\text{46}\) Furthermore, the authors’ research shows that some level of religious and spiritual activities among the widowed often serve to mitigate the negative effects of widowhood.\(^\text{47}\) For instance, several widows recalled that they engaged in religious activities such as joining their church choir, attending prayer meetings regularly, involving themselves in church activities, reading scriptures and passages from the Bible regularly, and praying alone and with others. According to Roff and her team of researchers, focusing on religious activities might provide the potential to help individuals find meaning in distress, and could be useful as a coping resource.\(^\text{48}\)

Mrs. J, who wed in her mid-twenties and was a widow within a year, suffered severe injuries from the accident that claimed her husband’s life, as well as the lives of two other people who were in the car. While she was in the hospital, her in-laws began to ask her for the key to her matrimonial home and by the time she was discharged, she was only allowed to collect her personal items such as clothes and shoes from her home.\(^\text{49}\) Mrs. J. states, “Initially I was blank. I


\(^{47}\) Ibid., 46.

\(^{48}\) Ibid.

\(^{49}\) Mrs. J, interview.
was just blank. I lost it. I lost interest in everything. I mean everything.”

She explained that by reading Bible passages, saying prayers, and with the support of her church members, she was able to put herself together.

Mrs. K, who had a similar experience in which she was only allowed to take her personal belongings from her home after the death of her husband, insists that “it’s just been the grace of God.”

Mrs. K, who said she could always be found on her knees praying to God, expressed belief that “there is a new dawn. I have always relied on the power of God.”

Several widows stated that they encouraged themselves with scriptures from the bible. Mrs. B, a Muslim, said she relied on her Islamic faith and was steadfast in saying her prayers as she faced economic challenges that befell her after her in-laws asked her to leave her matrimonial home. Although Mrs. O did not undergo any mourning rites, she spoke of not receiving any financial support from her in-laws. She insisted that it was her faith as a Christian that made it possible for her to overlook this issue and forgive them even though she felt bitter towards them. I asked Mrs. O how her faith helped her to cope and she replied, “Faith makes you loving, forgiving, and through this, it will attract people to you. It was my level of Christianity and education that helped me to think this way.”

Education and Gainful Employment

Amongst the widows that I interviewed, several of them were educated at various levels and they maintained that being educated or gainfully employed played a major role in their ability to cope. Two of the widows interviewed hold master’s degrees, four hold BSc or BA

50 Mrs. J, interview.
51 Ibid.
52 Mrs. K, interview.
53 Ibid.
54 Mrs. B, interview.
55 Mrs. O, interview.
degrees, and four hold OND or HND Diplomas. Mrs. O, who has a first degree spoke of how much she relied on her education and the fact that she was employed at the time her husband passed away.\textsuperscript{56} In her own words, “if I’m not working, definitely these children will not go to school. If there is no means, who will take care of them?”\textsuperscript{57} Another widow, Mrs. C who is an administrator, explained that her education and gainful employment at the time she lost her husband enabled her to focus on something else other than her grief and the predicament she found herself in as a widow. It also helped her especially as her in-laws did not let her or any of her children inherit her husband’s property.\textsuperscript{58}

Some explained that their education and employment status brought them financial independence and freedom that enabled them to care for themselves and their children. For instance, Mrs. S, whose in-laws turned hostile after she lost her husband states, “because I am an independent person in terms of my finances, I knew I didn’t need their support after the burial.”\textsuperscript{59} Mrs. U, a thirty-two year old widow with two young children to care for, explained that she can provide for her children because of her HND degree in accounting.\textsuperscript{60} Additionally, she gets paid to design graphics on flyers and posters for people. Mrs. H, whose in-laws took the deeds to her husband’s land when he passed away states, “I wonder what would have happened if I was not working, if I couldn’t fend for myself, if I had to depend on my in-laws who are not ready to do anything. That would have been very depressing and a catastrophe for me.”\textsuperscript{61} Mrs. E, a master’s degree holder who describes herself as enlightened, educated, and resilient insists, “Knowledge

\textsuperscript{56} Mrs. O, interview. 
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid. 
\textsuperscript{58} Mrs. C, interview. 
\textsuperscript{59} Mrs. S, interview. 
\textsuperscript{60} Mrs. U, interview. 
\textsuperscript{61} Mrs. H, interview by Esosa Mohammed, via Skype audio, August 24, 2018.
is power.” Although nothing prepared her for widowhood, being financially independent brought her some comfort and gave her something to fall back on.

Support from Family and Friends

All but one of the twelve widows identified the support of their family of origin as well as close friends as one of the key factors that gave them the strength to build resilience after their spouses passed away. The widows also mentioned that they received support from church members, co-workers, and even strangers previously unknown to them. The widows explained that not only did family members and close friends help them cope with loss, but also with the various challenges from widowhood practices and hostile in-laws. For instance, Mrs. B states that one of her close friends gave her a place to stay after her in-laws asked her to leave her matrimonial home. Likewise, Mrs. J was taken in by a member of her church who accommodated her and her three-month-old baby for months when they had no place to stay. Another widow, Mrs. K, spoke about her brother who agreed to become responsible for one of her children in order to reduce the financial burden on her.

Some widows spoke of their friends and colleagues at work who rallied around them, stayed over at their house to keep them company, and supported them as they faced stress. Mrs. S, whose in-laws wanted her to take an oath that she did not kill her husband, said her siblings supported her decision not to stay back in the village and be subjected to harmful traditional rites. Describing the encouragement and support they received, many of the widows described how their family and friends stood by them throughout, advising, encouraging, and supporting

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62 Mrs. E, interview.
63 Ibid.
64 Mrs. B, interview.
65 Mrs. J, interview.
66 Mrs. K, Interview.
67 Mrs. S, interview.
them at different stages. One widow, however, Mrs. U, states that she did not receive any support from her family. Rather, her brothers-in-law were the only people who supported her when her husband was ill and after he passed away. Four of the widows spoke about drawing strength from their children as well. To sum up in Mrs. H’s words, “what has helped me to cope has been encouragement and support from the people around me.”

**Female Agency (Speaking Up for Herself)**

Psychologist Alex Gillespie defines human agency as the extent to which an individual chooses to act independently by exercising her/his innate power. Female agency is the ability of women to speak out against unfair practices and norms that impinge on their rights and well-being. In his study on resilience, Ungar stresses the need for individuals to exercise personal agency in navigating their way towards discovering those factors s/he needs to overcome stress. Mrs. S exercised her personal agency by speaking up for herself when she quietly but firmly refused to allow a group of women to shave her hair after her husband died. She says, “So I reasoned, why should people I don’t know just come to cut my hair? So, when the women came, I said I was not going to allow that. If I am going to cut my hair, I am going to choose the person who will cut my hair and the person who will cut my hair is going to be a person that I know and that was a big problem for them.” For Mrs. S, refusing to allow strangers to shave her hair was

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68 Mrs. U, interview.
69 Ibid.
70 Mrs. H, interview.
71 “Position Exchange: The Social Development of Agency,” *New Ideas in Psychology* 30 (2012): 32, [https://ac.els-cdn.com/S0732118X1000022X/1-s2.0-S0732118X1000022X-main.pdf?_tid=51ea7ff2-5de0-4b03-b622-8b5b7de0ce7a&acdnat=1539388392_7af5b7bfc511aadac90a4ec12b6b745e](https://ac.els-cdn.com/S0732118X1000022X/1-s2.0-S0732118X1000022X-main.pdf?_tid=51ea7ff2-5de0-4b03-b622-8b5b7de0ce7a&acdnat=1539388392_7af5b7bfc511aadac90a4ec12b6b745e) (accessed October 9, 2018).
73 Mrs. S, Interview.
74 Ibid.
her own way of speaking up for herself. As she explained, “their hostility made me strong. Their hostility made me stand up and say I have to be brave and I have to be courageous for myself.”

Another widow, Mrs. K, told me how her in-laws asked her not to take a bath for seven days, but she did not observe the tradition and rather proceeded to bathe every day. Mrs. Q described how she stood up against her husband’s clanswomen who told her that if she did not agree to let them shave her hair, she would die after one year. In her words, “I told them that when my husband was alive, he cherished my hair and so nothing would make me cut the hair.” Mrs. Q also said she staunchly refused to abide by other mourning practices such as not eating food that was not cooked by another widow, wearing only white for a year, and staying in confinement for a year. When I asked her why she refused to obey the traditions, she replied: “I didn’t do that because I don’t believe in the custom. I cannot just sit down. Who will go and buy something for my children? So, I didn’t do it.”

Mrs. C exercised her personal agency by taking the liberty to shave her hair herself because she did not want any other person to do it. Mrs. C urges other widows “to put up a fight so that nobody puts you through something that will torture you for the rest of your lives.”

According to Mrs. J, “there is nothing wrong with a woman mourning her husband but they should not enforce anything on anybody; it is humiliating for crying out loud!” In their own ways, these widows demonstrate that not all women are victims of widowhood practices, but rather some are capable of exercising agency to resist cultural dictates that violate their rights as

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75 Mrs. S, interview.
76 Mrs. K, interview.
77 Mrs. Q, interview by Esosa Mohammed, via Skype audio, September 10, 2018.
78 Ibid.
79 Ibid.
80 Ibid.
81 Mrs. C, interview.
82 Mrs. J, interview.
women. It also shows that even though some widows agree to carry out these practices, in their own way, they are also exercising agency by insisting on who will cut their hair.

**Personal Attributes**

According to Mrs. J., “Even when people are there for you, they won’t be there forever. There is going to be a time that it has to be you.”

Apart from external factors that the widows relied on, several of them explained that they drew strength from their personal qualities such as hard work, focus, determination, self-motivation, and a positive attitude. For instance, through hard work and sheer determination, Mrs. J, whose in-laws asked her to leave her home, was able to obtain a small loan from a micro-finance company to begin a small business where she made snacks to sell.

She worked as a personal shopper for people, catering for small parties, and offering after-party cleaning services. In addition, she also used her diploma in education to begin teaching in a school. As she explained, “I may not be rich but I can provide for my family.” This widow relied on her innate ability to work hard so she could provide for herself and her daughter.

Hard work, determination, persistence, and focus frequently emerged in the widows’ interviews as attributes that enabled them to cope. Some widows told me that they had to do more than one job in order to make ends meet. For example, to provide for her two young children, Mrs. U works as a marketing officer in an engineering company, designs graphics on flyers and posters for clients, and run errands for people. Although Mrs. B did not have the opportunity to pursue a formal education, she did not allow this to affect her ability to provide

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83 Mrs. J, interview.
84 Ibid.
85 Ibid.
86 Ibid.
87 Ibid.
88 Mrs. U, interview.
for herself and her two children. According to her, ‘I don’t wait for people to help me. You can stand up and help yourself too.”\(^{89}\) To make ends meet, Mrs. B took up farming and engaged in petty trade.

One widow, Mrs. A, whose brother-in-law turned his back on her and her children because she refused to be “taken over by him” said, “I never lost focus; if I did, I would be dead by now.”\(^{90}\) Mrs. K describes herself as someone with a positive attitude that never allows anything to bring her down. In her words, “nothing can bring me down. You can bring me down but I’ll be sure I am going to get up in the next one hour because I have to go on and that is what has kept me.” Mrs. S also described herself as “dogged and courageous.”\(^{91}\) Adding to this, she explained that she does not subject herself to self-pity, but instead chooses to stand up for herself.\(^{92}\) Mrs. Q ended her own interview by stating, “I know that my future is bright because I never give up.”\(^{93}\)

To summarize, the results from both the interviews and the survey questionnaires reveal diverse, yet shared perceptions of the phenomena of widowhood practices. The role of religion was present in several widows’ narratives. For instance, one of the four widows, who was not subject to adverse widowhood practices, mentions Christianity as the reason her in-laws did not subject her to any mourning rites or practices. Another interesting result from the interview transcripts as well as the survey results is that traumatic and adverse widowhood practices in Nigeria are commonly practiced across the board, irrespective of religious beliefs. In this study, eight out of the twelve widows that I interviewed described adverse practices they were subject

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\(^{89}\) Mrs. B, interview.
\(^{90}\) Mrs. A, interview.
\(^{91}\) Mrs. S, interview.
\(^{92}\) Ibid.
\(^{93}\) Mrs. Q, interview.
to and the women comprised of one Muslim and the rest Christians. For instance, in Mrs. S’s case, the group of women who attempted to cut her hair were affiliated with a church.

This finding is very important in our understanding of the persistence of widowhood practices despite attempts to eradicate it. Furthermore, this finding suggests that some of these adverse practices gain the wide acceptance that they have because individuals of different religious denominations subscribe to and even buy into these practices. A close look at other scholarships carried out on widows in Nigeria, Ghana, and South Africa reveals the same trend, where the widows identify both themselves and their in-laws or clan members with contemporary religious beliefs.⁹⁴ One direction for future research is a more elaborate investigation on this point and the implications this finding holds for the effort to end discriminatory widowhood practices in Nigeria.

Although intersectionality theory was not one of the theories I employed in this study, I however drew on its underlying concept, which maintains that women suffer a greater disadvantage through their unique social status. In “Gender: An Intersectionality Perspective,” Stephanie Shields insists that women’s “social locations as reflected in their social identities must be at the forefront of feminist research.”⁹⁵ Adopting an intersectional lens in this study helped to reveal ways in which Nigerian widows experience widowhood and how their social locations operate to shape their lived experience. One of the goals of this study was to ascertain whether a widow’s social demographics such as age, level of education, religion, or ethnicity

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affect the way in which she experiences widowhood and also how it impacts on her ability to demonstrate resilience. Excerpts from the interviews reveal that while the social locations of the widows did not hinder or affect their ability to demonstrate resilience, it did however affect the way they individually experienced widowhood as well as their level of coping.

For instance, the way a woman’s experience intersects with her social circumstances to produce unique challenges reflected in Mrs. B’s narrative. According to Mrs. B, her education was cut short when she was at elementary school. Mrs. B’s in-laws asked her to leave her matrimonial home with her two children because she refused to be inherited by her brother-in-law. Due to her lack of formal education, Mrs. B resorted to farming to fend for herself and children. Her low level of education thus served as a barrier to her being able to get a good paying job. Ultimately, her choice of farming roots itself in the patriarchal and gendered oppression that she experienced as a result of being a widow in Nigeria. On the other hand, Mrs. E and Mrs. S, whose level of education was considerably higher, had a different widowhood experience wherein they found it easier to cope. Applying an intersectional lens, Mrs. B can thus be said to face a double jeopardy by virtue of first being a widow and then a widow with a low level of education. Mrs. B explained that initially, she found it difficult to cope or fend for herself: “if I had more education, I can work in an office and earn a salary.” However, she did not allow her lack of higher education to faze her and she went on to describe how farming and petty trading helped her fend for herself and her children.

96 Mrs. B, interview.
97 Ibid.
98 Ibid.
99 Ibid.
100 Ibid.
During the interviews, I received diverse responses from the participants based on their personal circumstances and life experiences. Interestingly, the results of both the interviews and the survey show that the ability of the participants to cope and provide for themselves extended beyond their education, ethnicity, age, or religion through hard work, being focused, and self-determination. They displayed these traits by engaging in different means of livelihood to survive including farming, taking a loan to start a small business, undertaking cleaning jobs, and so on. The analysis that follows focuses on three key areas that arise directly from the interviewees’ responses and are significant to this resilience-based study: re-integrating from disruptions in life, giving voice, and developing agency.

**Discussion**

One of the goals of this study was to explore resilience in Nigerian widows within the broad context of their sociocultural realities and at the same time to learn ways in which they cope with the challenges of widowhood. As each participant vividly described her individual experience, patterns of resilience and agency slowly emerged.

“Re-Integrating From Disruptions In Life”: A Resilient Approach

The use of resilience theory as one of the theoretical frameworks for this research was to provide the context in which the different ways some Nigerian widows cope with the trauma, stress, and challenges of widowhood can be understood. Although several models of resilience exist, this study adopts the socio-ecological model proposed by several resilience researchers among them Michael Ungar, Emmy Werner, Lidewyde Berckmoes and Valentina Mazzucato, who emphasize the dynamic interaction between an individual’s internal and external
qualities. Resilience research shows that one’s ability to overcome negative or adverse life experience does not occur in a vacuum, but rather depends mostly on the interconnectedness between the individual and her/his social ecology. In the midst of struggles and challenges, some individuals do not give in to despair or hopelessness, but instead rely on both their personal traits and strengths as well as social support to overcome their challenges. As the interview transcripts reveal, some Nigerian widows were able to do so by virtue of their personalities as well as their social networks. In *Researching Resilience*, Michael Ungar and Louise Liebenberg define resilience research as focusing on the ways in which individuals thrive when exposed to stressful environments rather than concentrating on disease, disorder, or dysfunction. Implicit in Ungar and Liebenberg’s concept of resilience is the ability of some individuals to remain positive and optimistic even as they face stress, adversity, and trauma. Through their interviews, the widows revealed individual ways in which they constructed and fostered resilience in their daily lives, revealing the varied strategies they relied on to adapt and thrive despite their experiences of loss.

Catherine Panter-Brick, an interdisciplinary researcher in resilience and global adversity, maintains that one of the best and practical ways to learn about resilience is by talking with and listening to the lived experience of people. Both the results of the survey questionnaires and interviews reveal that some Nigerian widows rely on faith and belief in God, education and gainful employment, financial independence, and the support from family and friends to cope

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102 *Researching Resilience*, 3.

with the challenges of adverse widowhood. In addition, personal qualities such as hard work, doggedness, focus, and female agency also emerge as some of the coping mechanisms on which the interview participants relied. These coping mechanisms enumerated here can thus be said to reflect some Nigerian widows’ patterns of positive adaptation to the ordeal and trauma of widowhood practices. One widow, Mrs. C described herself as resilient and went on to define resilience as she sees it: “resilience means not giving up no matter the challenges.”

Likewise, the contextual nature of resilience is evident in Mrs. B’s narrative that reveals she refuses to allow her lack of higher education deter her from providing for her children.

The coping patterns that emerge from this study on Nigerian widows accords with other studies on resilience. For instance, Rose Korang-Okrah conducted a similar qualitative study on twenty Ghanaian widows with a similar thesis: “What would you say are the factors that have contributed to your continued existence and functioning?” In her results, the widows’ narratives revealed factors such as income stability, supportive family and friends, a strong belief in God, and engagement in church and social activities.

This study on Nigerian widows contributes to the extant literature on widowhood in Nigeria by qualitatively identifying what strategies and resources some Nigerian widows adopt to promote positive well-being and keep their chins up in the face of stress, trauma, and adversity. Despite the demographic differences, most of the widows faced similar issues, among them hostile in-laws, demeaning and hegemonic cultural practices, and disinheritance, and they all narrated similar ways of coping with the trauma of widowhood. The widows’ coping mechanisms also bear out Hendrickson et al.’s qualitative

104 Mrs. C, interview.
research on four Nepali widows, which concluded that both individual assets and social resources contribute to a widow’s resilient outcomes.106

My findings also accords with those of other resilience studies. Several studies emphasize that the socioecological model of resilience provides a useful framework for conceptualizing emerging resilient outcomes because of its inherent notion that some individuals do well in spite of encountering challenges. According to Richardson, “ecological sources provide or trigger resilience in people” and this concept is evident in the lives of all twelve widows.”107 For Mrs. A and Mrs. U, support from their brothers-in-laws helped them to cope with the challenges of widowhood. Mrs. U recounted that her brother-in-law stood by her when her husband was sick and when her family turned their backs on her. Pratyusha Tummala-Narra, a researcher on mental health and trauma, similarly adopts an ecological perspective to establish a better understanding of the nuances of trauma and expressions of resilience across different contexts.108

For Tummala-Narra, the socioecological model provides a useful framework in which one’s traumatic history and functioning can be conceptualized.109 Resilience is a desirable quality that should be encouraged and fostered particularly among marginalized and oppressed groups because it allows individuals to thrive in settings of adversity and trauma.

Although the interview participants identified several coping mechanisms upon which they relied, faith and belief in God were uppermost in their narratives. According to Stephanie Brown, Randolph Nesse, James House, and Rebecca Utz in “Religion and Emotional Compensation: Results From a Prospective Study of Widowhood,” among the most challenging

106 “Resilience Among Nepali Widows After the Death of a Spouse,” 1.
109 Ibid., 216.
part of being human is the “knowledge that we are mortal and that we will experience grief when loved ones die.” Maintaining that religion, to an extent, is somewhat neglected in psychological research, the team of researchers studied 103 widows to discover whether losing one’s spouse could result in an increase in the importance they attach to religious and spiritual beliefs. The authors found that “a spiritual connection with God may help individuals to find comfort during times of loss.” All the widows identified their faith as a, if not the, primary factor they relied on as they grieved the loss of their husbands. The eight widows who went through demeaning cultural practices and/or faced hostility from their in-laws, maintained that their faith in God sustained them in no small measure. According to Richardson, most individuals believe not only that their strength comes from their spiritual beliefs, but also that resilience influences one’s belief in God. For example, Mrs. Q maintained that her belief and faith in God made her bold and strong enough to stand up to her in-laws and refuse to have her hair shaved. She said: “what I did was I asked God for wisdom. I asked God to direct me and since then, he has been fighting my battles.”

Panter-Brick suggests that demonstrating resilience can also be seen as an effort to sustain a sense of hope and dignity. As I spoke to the widows, I realized that some of their actions resonate with Panter-Brick’s insight, for instance when Mrs. C and Mrs. S quietly but firmly insisted that if their hair must be cut, they would either do it themselves or choose who

111 Ibid., 1165.
112 Ibid.
114 Mrs. Q, interview.
115 Ibid.
would do it. Inherent in their actions is a sense of dignity and agency, traits synonymous with resilience. Studying resilience means understanding not only the stress that individuals face, but more importantly, the means and strategies they adopt to cope and survive. As the results of this research show, the ability to demonstrate resilience depends on a number of factors. For Mrs. S, it was her faith, family, financial independence and agency, while for Mrs. J, it was keeping focus, determination, and support from her church members.

Giving Voice

According to Swignoski, giving voice to research subjects enables researchers to understand hidden aspects of the social order better, how it works, how it is constructed, and how it is maintained.117 Some of the widows spoke candidly about having the opportunity to speak about their experiences.

Mrs. H exclaimed, “It is alien in our culture to speak out and most times, we bottle everything in but widows need to speak out and express their feelings.”118 Mrs. J, explained, “Our culture does not give room for women to express themselves or to be heard.”119 Mrs. P noted, “I wish more people like you will interview women, especially widows, to know their pains, their problems, and what they are going through.”120 Mrs. A shared with me, “This is the first time I have been allowed to talk about my experience. It has always been something that I keep inside, think about, and just cry about.”121

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118 Mrs. H, interview.
119 Mrs. J, interview.
120 Mrs. P, interview.
121 Mrs. A, interview.
Likewise, Amina Mama acknowledges the critical need to give voice to women whose perspectives and voices have been silenced for a long time. In her article, Mama maintains that through oral interviews, life stories, and story-telling, African feminist researchers give voice to women, therefore encouraging the articulation of previously unavailable narratives.¹²²

In addition to producing insights on the social order, giving voice to women makes their private, everyday life experiences visible and helps to weaken patriarchy. One of the goals of this research was to prioritize the voice of twelve Nigerian widows and in doing so, provide them with the opportunity to speak for themselves and to share their lived experiences of widowhood. With the exception of one widow, none of the other eleven women I interviewed had previously shared their experiences. The harmful and traumatic practices that accompany widowhood in Africa appear to be deeply entrenched in Nigerian societies despite the differences in demographic factors, which leads Uchechukwu Ewelukwa to note that overcoming centuries of myths and superstitious beliefs is not an easy task.¹²³ This can be seen in the present day as these practices continue to receive support even in the face of contemporary religion and modernity. Even though none of the widows I interviewed identified with traditional religion, the survey results show that these practices operate independently of the conception of their religion’s tenets and practices. Giving voice to the widows also highlights the unequal power dynamics that exist between the sociocultural widowhood norms for men and women, and the ways in which the difference in roles operates as a source of trauma to women.

Providing a platform for widows to speak exposes the emotional, social, and psychological trauma they endure as they navigate through hostile in-laws and cultural dictates. Giving widows voice also presents them with the opportunity to speak about their lived

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¹²² “What Does It Mean To Do Feminist Research In African Contexts?” 13.
¹²³ “Post-Colonialism, Gender, Customary Injustice,” 485.
experiences and talk about their stories of widowhood and as Bowell states, allows them to gain an element of power and control over their lives.\textsuperscript{124}

As widows speak out, the patterns of hegemonic oppression that they face, as well as strategies they employ to cope, begin to emerge, and it is in this sense that women, particularly marginalized women, can begin to learn more about themselves and each other, and to speak out against gender inequalities. Through giving voice to women, cultural and social meanings are better understood as they affect the lives of the narrators. Amy Wilkins notes that stories are capable of generating and producing new institutional and cultural responses.\textsuperscript{125} As the widows share their experiences and describe the traumatic impact widowhood has on Nigerian women, this can create awareness of what they go through and spur well-meaning individuals and institutions to action.

Most importantly, giving voice to widows brings to light the ways in which they empower themselves and resist oppression. Although Remi Akujobi, a professor of English and literary studies, describes Nigerian widows as “silent victims who suffer cruel and dehumanizing cultural practices,”\textsuperscript{126} I refuse to label widows as “silent victims” and rather choose to reveal the different ways in which these widows demonstrate strength and resilience. In addition, this study also reveals the ways Nigerian widows exercise agency; they do so by resisting hegemonic and gendered practices, speaking up for themselves, and in doing so, they empower themselves.

Another advantage of sharing one’s experience is its potential to bring about healing from grief and trauma. Liat Ayalon observes that talking about one’s experience can serve as a

\textsuperscript{124} “Feminist Standpoint Theory,” 6.
positive coping method. This research not only provides the opportunity for Nigerian widows to narrate their struggles and challenges, but it also captures and helps to document their stories of resilience and strength. Invariably, feminist theory seeks to better women’s lives, and one way it achieves this is by enabling them share their unique lived experiences.

The participants spoke of navigating their way through the dilemmas they faced with hostile in-laws, single-handedly caring for children, and not being allowed to inherit their husband’s property; but more importantly, they revealed the ways in which they were able to forge ahead through hard work, determination, doggedness with help from family and friends. This thesis is therefore significant because it addresses fundamental aspects of women’s well-being in a patriarchal environment where they face sociocultural inequalities in society and endure multiple levels of gender inequities. Although Nigerian widows experience their fair share of challenges and struggles, within those struggles emerge coping and resilient capacities, female agency, and hidden strength.

Despite extant scholarship on widowhood in Nigeria, the voices of widows have remained mostly silent, making them unable to articulate their lived experience or offer their opinions and unique perspectives on the phenomena of widowhood practices. For instance, in their own words, the widows in this study revealed their aversion to widowhood practices and thus refutes previous studies that claim, “society creates widowhood rites to protect women and their overall wellbeing.”


Although each woman had a different story, two similarities stood out in the narratives: the value of resiliency as a survival tool and the ability to find meaning or purpose even when faced with difficulties and challenges. Both of these findings are vital because of the opportunity they present for personal growth, not just for other widows, but also for women who are marginalized. Mrs. J found meaning and purpose by establishing a foundation for other widows. Another widow, Mrs. K, found her purpose by engaging in politics and today, she is an advocate for matters that affect women. As for myself, I found meaning and purpose by making the decision to leave Nigeria and attend graduate school in America. For some of the other widows I interviewed such as Mrs. C, Mrs. S, and Mrs. Q, their ability to make decisions on matters that affect their well-being speaks to their realization of self-dignity, realization of their independent selves, and their capacity to take charge of their lives.

A widow’s potential to speak up for herself serves to create new widowhood narratives that can lead to sociocultural change. One critical importance of the women’s narratives is that they signify the first steps towards speaking up for themselves, speaking against unfair and cruel practices, and striving to improve their individual and collective circumstances. This qualitative study fills the knowledge gap in research on the coping mechanisms that Nigerian widows employ to survive and the strategies that emerge from this study lays a premise for other women to emulate. Consequently, these widows’ stories become important sources of knowledge and it is in this sense I argue that narratives of marginalized and oppressed women hold an epistemic advantage in research, particularly those studies that seek to obtain a comprehensive and deeper understanding of social issues from the unique perspectives of the group under study.
Agency and Empowerment

This research recognizes and emphasizes the potential of Nigerian widows for exercising agency in spite of their being situated within patriarchal structures that operate to perpetuate gender inequality. Several scholars have drawn attention to female agency as a way through which women can empower themselves and gain control over their lives. Social psychologists Catherine Campbell and Jenevieve Mannell draw attention to women’s agency as a means of realizing social change. In their work, both scholars conceptualize the agency of marginalized women, not as an individual effort, but rather as distributed across an individual’s social network that includes friends, family members, and children, as well as wider networks such as colleagues at work or church members. The widows I interviewed also relied on their social networks to help them cope with loss and grief. The presence of an individual’s social network together with her personality traits creates more opportunities for exercising agency, as several of the widows revealed during their interview.

Social psychologist Julian Rappaport focuses on the strength and meaning that emerges from narratives and emphasizes its “powerful effects on human behavior.” One of the ways in which Nigerian widows can empower themselves is by sharing their experiences, which can help them as well as other widows to discover their independent selves. This study therefore succeeds in creating new and better narratives of widowhood, strength, and agency.

Masten and Powell explain that one of the important contributions of using a resilience framework is the attention it brings to positive outcomes. Despite the challenges and stress

130 Ibid. 20-21.
131 “Empowerment Meets Narrative,” 796.
they faced, several widows spoke about their desire to help other widows by sharing their personal experiences, providing financial assistance, and encouraging them in any way possible. In other words, demonstrating resilience can also help one find meaning and purpose, as with Mrs. J, who has been able to make her wish of reaching out to other widows and helping them come true. According to Mrs. J:

I started reaching out to widows the same year I became one. In my whole life, I didn’t think I will ever have anything to do with widows. It’s not part of the direction I could ever imagine in my life. So, I thought to myself that if this could ever happen to me, then it could happen to anybody. So, I determined that I will just look for a way to make a difference.¹³³

In 2006, she established a foundation starting with twenty-four widows and today over 300 widows benefit from the foundation. Mrs. J explains that apart from organizing prayer groups and social events to keep the women active, she also shares her story with the widows as a way of encouraging them to forge ahead and think positively despite the circumstances in which they find themselves. She emphasizes that “there are times when we know that the only option we have in life is to be strong.”¹³⁴ Interestingly, resilience researchers Andrew Zolli and Ann Marie Healy both maintain that individuals, groups, and communities who have suffered trauma can recover and may even discover an avenue for growth as they embrace resilience.¹³⁵ At the end of her interview, Mrs. J shared this with me: “Concerning my in-laws, seriously, I appreciate them because I believe this is just the reason why I came to the world. I feel fulfilled touching lives, making other widows happy, seeing them smile.”¹³⁶ Although Mrs. J and several other widows


¹³³ Mrs. J, interview.
¹³⁴ Mrs. J, interview.
¹³⁶ Ibid.
in this study have had their fair share of struggles, from these struggles emerge their resilient abilities, agency, and strength. In her study, Werner insists that “adversity by itself does not need to destroy you; in fact, it can strengthen you and especially help you give back to others.”

Mrs. J’s personal narrative serves not only as a source of self-empowerment for her but to others as well. By helping other widows create new stories of strength, agency, and empowerment, Mrs. J, too, empowers herself.

I developed this thesis to serve as a starting point for opening up the conversation on coping through resilience, not only for Nigerian widows but for other marginalized women within their diverse sociocultural realities and contexts. The primary reason that underlay my interest was to investigate ways in which Nigerian widows can learn to cope with adverse widowhood practices that threaten their well-being, self-esteem, and dignity. Being resilient enables individuals to be better prepared to deal with adversity and trauma. As this study shows, resilience can spur individuals to exercise agency over their affairs. Yet nothing prepared me for the range of emotions I felt as I embarked on this research or the ways in which it has impacted me. For instance, my interaction with the widows who gave me permission to interview them has taught me much about finding meaning in suffering, standing up for myself, and being courageous, no matter the circumstance. It has also taught me about the need for hard work, determination, and persistence even as one faces challenging circumstances. Helping to facilitate the widows to find their voices through telling their stories provided me with the incentive, drive, and passion to finish this work.

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Researching and writing this project, particularly Chapters 4 and 5, have been emotionally challenging for me by forcing me to relive my own widowhood experience of sitting in the hospital, waiting to be told we can all go home soon, and then the awful moment when I was told that my husband had passed away. However, as hard as it was to write, the entire process has been therapeutic because it has also helped me to confront my pent-up grief and emotions. In addition, this study has opened my eyes to the grief, pain, and suffering of others, such that I am more appreciative of life and of my family and friends. My research journey from start to finish has strengthened me emotionally and intellectually, laying a solid foundation for further research on resilience in marginalized groups. It has also enhanced my ability to help others, and this can be in simple ways such as listening and empathizing. In his book *Man’s Search for Meaning*, Victor Frankl makes the case that meaning can emerge in spite of and through suffering.\(^\text{138}\) Initially, the pain from the sudden loss of my husband left me incapable of moving forward and I found meaning in nothing for a long time, but after an extremely difficult year where I did absolutely nothing but dwell in my grief, I decided to leave Nigeria and attend graduate school in America. As I approach the end of my two year graduate program at ETSU, I am filled with trepidation of what the future holds for me, but through the support of my faith in God, family, close friends, and my unrelenting tenacity, I remain positive because as Frankl states, if one cannot change a situation that causes suffering, s/he can still choose what attitude to adopt.\(^\text{139}\)

**Limitations of the Study and Recommendations for Further Research**

Although this research has achieved its objectives using interviews, survey questionnaires, and textual sources, I am aware of its limitations and shortcomings. One major

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\(^{139}\) Ibid., 148.
limitation in this research is the sample size I used for the surveys and interviews. Apart from the small sample size, I could have interviewed Nigerian widows of different religions, ethnicity, and educational status to discover whether there were any differences in how these women demonstrate resilience. This study is also limited by my inability to travel to Nigeria and physically interview the widows.

Although the outcomes from this research cannot be extended to larger populations due to its sample size, nonetheless, the research findings from this study can serve as a means to help Nigerian widows build and/or to maintain resilience. Furthermore, this study also serve as a step towards creating new discourses on widows’ empowerment through documenting their stories of agency and strength as they face stressful and adverse widowhood challenges. By telling their stories, better narratives of resilience and agency emerges with implications for sociocultural change. Yet, much remains to be understood about the actual origin of widowhood practices and the reason they receive such a wide social acceptance that cuts across ethnicity, age, class, and level of education. In particular, as this study discovered that widowhood practices are carried out across contemporary religions, I also recommend a more thorough examination of why adherents of contemporary religious beliefs subscribe to these practices that appear to be in contrast with their fundamental ethos and tenets.

I also recommend a larger study to discover how Nigerian widows of differing religious persuasions, from a range of economic classes, and from different tribes confront and deal with oppression, marginalization, and gender inequality as this will serve to deepen our understanding of how they construct resilience in their diverse circumstances. For example, studies with a particular focus on widows in Northern Nigeria could be carried out to discover more about their widowhood context and how they negotiate their day to day existence in patriarchal settings. My
interview participants included only one widow from the North and therefore I did not get the opportunity to learn more about the viewpoint, perspectives, or unique widowhood experiences of widows from this area. The issue of women as enforcers of patriarchal widowhood practices is yet another opportunity for further study, and questions such as why they are willing to carry out this function and how this bears on the call to end gendered and harmful widowhood practices needs to be asked. It is therefore crucial that further study be carried out with the aim of critically analyzing what the significance women’s serving as agents of patriarchy holds for Nigerian women’s social agency and empowerment.

Scholarly inquiry using larger studies should be carried out on how resilience can be learned, as studies show it to be a desirable and valuable quality that should be encouraged and fostered, particularly among marginalized and oppressed groups. Lastly, continuous study on resilience and agency among Nigerian widows and other marginalized groups can contribute to the design and implementation of appropriate prevention and intervention strategies by non-governmental organizations, community social groups, and international organizations for individuals and groups facing adversity.\textsuperscript{140} All recommendations made here are based on my findings from this research.

CHAPTER 6

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The survey and interview data collected from twelve widows show that some Nigerian widows do thrive and find ways to cope despite their experiences with adverse, stressful, and traumatic widowhood practices. The survey results reveal that contrary to popular belief, some widows experience adverse widowhood practices irrespective of their level of education or the religion they identify with. However, the results also show that not every Nigerian widow experiences widowhood in the same way. Out of the twelve interview participants in this study, four of them maintained that they were not made to perform any cultural rites. One critical insight that can be drawn from this finding is that the way a Nigerian widow experiences widowhood depends on her particular circumstances and may vary across contexts, social demographics, and existing relationships. The remaining eight widows, however, described their traumatic experiences with demeaning and gendered cultural practices, coupled with a lack of support from their in-laws.

Adopting a feminist standpoint and resilience framework allowed a better, deeper understanding of the way some Nigerian widows perceive widowhood rites and practices, and the coping strategies they devise to survive. It also creates a basis through which one can see the diverse ways in which women confront their oppression and source of trauma and, more importantly, how they overcome their challenges individually and collectively. Throughout this study, I have argued for a theoretical approach that places focus on the strengths and coping abilities of widows rather than on their plights. This interdisciplinary study shows that Nigerian widows demonstrate resilience and exercise their agency even as they navigate through the challenges and trauma of demeaning and stressful rites. As they shared their personal
experiences, their narratives revealed a repetitive pattern of the coping mechanisms they employ: faith and belief in God, education and gainful employment, support from family and friends, exercising female agency, and personal attributes such as hard work, determination, doggedness, and a positive attitude.

Although existing literature grounds widowhood rites in traditional indigenous religious beliefs and practices, the results from this study show that adherents to Christianity and Islam also support such practices. Ewelukwa remarks that the “fight in Nigeria against traditional practices that are harmful to women forms part of a global struggle against women in the private sphere.”

1 It is only when women are treated fairly and equally that they are able to contribute significantly to the economy, society, and to their households in their own right.

Through the narratives of twelve Nigerian widows, this study reveals ways that widowhood rites and practices serve as symbols to maintain hierarchies and inequalities between men and women, particularly within their family units. In a presentation given at the Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN), Bene Madunaga, co-founder of the feminist organization Women in Nigeria (WIN) insists that the African system provides a framework that perpetuates inequality, male dominance, and discriminatory gender roles between men and women with the exploitation and oppression of women at the core.2 This study makes visible the everyday lives of marginalized women that are not immediately discernible to the public sphere. The narratives of the widows in this study are not simply stories of cultural adversity and vulnerability; rather, they provide a vivid portrayal of the ways through which they

1 Ewelukwa, “Post-Colonialism, Gender, Customary Injustice,” 486.
individually and collectively survive and empower themselves as they negotiate their sociocultural realities. As they shared their trajectories of loss and trauma, they also revealed unknown strengths and fortitude.

One of my goals in this study was to advance the theoretical and empirical literature on Nigerian widows’ resilience. Another goal was to analyze the implications of Nigerian widows’ resilience on their ability to exercise agency. My approach to the phenomenon of widowhood practices by using a resilience framework and standpoint theory offers a different perspective on widowhood in Nigeria and makes three specific contributions to the existing literature on widowhood. First, it provides insight into the private lives of some Nigerian widows, their experiences, and perceptions of widowhood. This study brings to light those issues that lay obscure and hidden, such as the way some women are treated within their family units. Second, it highlights the remarkable strength of some widows and reveals the socioecological coping patterns that they rely on to survive: faith in God, emotional and financial support from family and friends, focus, hard work, doggedness, financial independence, education, and determination. Third, it demonstrates the various ways and means that Nigerian widows employ to empower themselves as they face stressful and traumatic situations that forms a part of their widowhood realities. This study also provides a platform in the public sphere for Nigerian widows to share their lived experiences and to enable them contribute directly to the discourse, not only on widowhood but also on exercising agency, female empowerment, and generating new ways in which Nigerian widows can learn to go on to live meaningful and fulfilled lives.
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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Primary Sources - Interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Time of Interview</th>
<th>Mode of Interview</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. A</td>
<td>September 3</td>
<td>10am</td>
<td>Via Skype Audio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. B</td>
<td>September 7</td>
<td>10am</td>
<td>Via Skype Audio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. E</td>
<td>September 2</td>
<td>5pm</td>
<td>Via Skype Audio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. H</td>
<td>August 24</td>
<td>5am</td>
<td>Via Skype Audio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. S</td>
<td>August 27</td>
<td>4pm</td>
<td>Via Skype Audio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. J</td>
<td>August 26</td>
<td>3pm</td>
<td>Via Skype Audio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. K</td>
<td>September 7</td>
<td>9am</td>
<td>Via Skype Audio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. C</td>
<td>September 3</td>
<td>1pm</td>
<td>Via Skype Audio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. O</td>
<td>August 18</td>
<td>7am</td>
<td>Via Skype Audio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. P</td>
<td>September 3</td>
<td>8am</td>
<td>Via Skype Audio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Q</td>
<td>September 10</td>
<td>2pm</td>
<td>Via Skype Audio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. U</td>
<td>August 19</td>
<td>7am</td>
<td>Via Skype Audio</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Primary Sources – Surveys

In addition, I sent out survey questionnaires to twenty widows electronically via Survey monkey.

The first survey was sent out on August 15 and by September 10, all the responses had been electronically returned.
Hello. My name is Esosa Frances Mohammed and I am a graduate student at East Tennessee State University (ETSU). I am in the Liberal Studies Department and my concentration is in Gender and Diversity. I am conducting research for my thesis and the focus is on the resilience and strength of widows in Nigeria. I am particularly interested in discovering the coping mechanisms they use when faced with adverse widowhood practices. Thank you for agreeing to be a part of this research. Your contribution is extremely valuable. I have some questions written down to guide the interview but please feel free to share anything you think will be beneficial to this research. The interview will last approximately 45-60 minutes. Please feel free to stop at any time you want to, and you can choose not to answer any question you are not comfortable with. If you need a break at any time, please let me know and I will stop.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S/no</th>
<th>Research Questions based on Research question one</th>
<th>Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(What are some of the effects of widowhood practices on Nigerian widows?)</td>
<td>Do you have children? If yes, how many?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>How old are you? Where were you born?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Where did you grow up?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>How old were you when you got married?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>What religion/ethnic group do you identify with?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I am now going to ask you how you lost your husband. This may make you become emotional and we can pause,</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
take a break or stop completely if you want to.

Thank you for sharing your experience with me. I appreciate it and I am truly sorry for your loss.

I want to learn how your town treats women who lose their husbands. So please can you tell me how you were treated? For example, were you asked to perform any practices?

**Transitional Questions**

**Key Research Question** - What key factors enable Nigerian widows cope with and demonstrate resilience to detrimental and traumatic widowhood practices?

Whom do you think benefits from these practices?

Were you able to cope with these practices? If yes, can you please identify the key factors that enabled you to demonstrate resilience despite all you went through?

Does the social status of Nigerian widows affect their widowhood experiences and ability to demonstrate resilience?

What was your social status at the time you lost your spouse? (please note that social status here means level of education and work status). What was your level of education during the time you were married? Were you a stay at home wife, worked for yourself, or had a career?

Does every widow go through similar experience as you have just described? Are widowed men subject to the same practices as widowed women in your town?
Do you think women with a higher social status are able to demonstrate resilience more compared with those with a lower social status?

Closing Questions

Do you think research into widows’ wellbeing in Nigeria is vital? If yes, why?

Is there any additional thing you would like to add to this discussion that we have not covered?

Thank you so much for your time.
APPENDIX C: SURVEY QUESTIONS

Personal/Demographic

1. What is your current age range?
   - 18-25
   - 26-40
   - 41-55
   - 55-65
   - Prefer not to answer

2. How old were you at the time you lost your spouse?
   - Survey participant to insert her answer
   - Cannot choose/Refused

4. Which Nigerian ethnic group do you belong to?
   - Ibo
   - Yoruba
   - Hausa
   - Other
   - Cannot choose/Refused

5. Which one of the following religion do you identify with?
   - Christianity
   - Islam
   - African Tradition
   - Other
   - Prefer not to answer

Social status of Nigerian widows and how it might affect their widowhood experiences and ability to demonstrate resilience?

6. Were you educated at the time you lost your spouse?
   - No
7. What was your highest level of education?
   - Primary school certificate
   - OND/HND Diploma
   - BSc/BA degree
   - Masters degree
   - PhD
   - Other
   - Prefer not to answer

8. As a widow, were you subject to any stressful practice?
   - Yes
   - No
   - Prefer not to answer

Coping mechanisms

9. Please tick any of the following widowhood practice (s) that you might have been subjected to:
   - Shaved my hair
   - Wore dark colored clothes
   - Confined indoors for a certain period
   - Slept in the same room with the deceased
   - Drank water used to wash the deceased’s body
   - Did not get any support from your in-laws
   - You were not allowed to inherit any of your spouse’s property (vehicle, house, etc.)
   - Other –
     Please print__________________________
   - Prefer not to answer

10. Were you able to cope despite what you had to undergo as a widow?
    - Yes
    - No
    - Prefer not to answer
11. In your opinion, do you think your level of education increased your resilience?
   - No
   - Yes
   - Prefer not to answer

12. Can you please identify mechanism you employed to cope with these practices?
   - #
   - #
   - #
   - #
   - #
   - #
   - Prefer not to answer

13. In your opinion, do you think Nigerian widows are coping with these practices?
   - No
   - Yes
   - Prefer not to answer

14. Do you think there is a need for research into widows’ wellbeing?
   - Yes
   - No
   - Prefer not to answer

15. Please feel free to add any comment below if there is any additional thing you would like to add to this discussion that was not covered?
Thank you for your cooperation in completing this survey!

Will you like to be interviewed for my research study on the experience of Nigerian widows and how they cope with the challenges of adverse widowhood practices?

Yes, I will like to be interviewed

No, I do not want to be interviewed

Complete
This Informed Consent will explain about being part of this research study. It is important that you read this material carefully and then decide if you wish to voluntarily take part in it.

**Research Information:** My name is Esosa Frances Mohammed and I am a graduate student at East Tennessee State University (ETSU). My research project is titled “Exploring Resilience and Strength in Narratives of Nigerian Widows: An Interdisciplinary Analysis of Coping Mechanisms in Response to Harmful Widowhood Practices in South-West Nigeria” and I am conducting interviews to hear directly from widows in Nigeria how they cope with the challenges and stress of widowhood practices.

**Purpose:** This research wants to discover and understand the internal and external factors responsible for Nigerian widows’ ability to cope and adapt when faced with challenges and adversity from the cultural and social practices they undergo as widows. Previous studies show that a resilience-based approach to the plight of widows can result in empowerment and self-confidence in widows and prepare them for future challenges. Data from this study can therefore be useful to other researchers who are interested in this or similar topic. In addition, the data from this research will be valuable in the efforts of social workers and counselors to improve the long-term health and well-being of widows.

**Procedure/Duration** – Your participation in this study will consist of an interview that will be between 40-60 minutes. You will be asked a series of questions about your life and widowhood experiences and the interview will be audio-recorded. A part of your interview, including quotes, may be used in my thesis project and you can request to see any quotes I intend to use, and this will be sent to you via email for you to review. You do not have to answer the interview questions and you can refuse to answer any question that makes you feel uncomfortable. The location and time of the interview will be left for you to decide. However, it is advisable that you pick a time and location that will allow you to have privacy and little or no distractions.

**Possible Risks or Discomforts** – During the interview, some of the questions may make you feel uncomfortable or emotional since this study asks questions about your widowhood experience. Please know that you have the right to take some time to regain your emotions or choose to end the interview immediately. However, you may also feel better after you have had the chance to express yourself about your experience and talking about the things you had to do to survive.

**Possible Benefits** – There will be no direct benefit to you from participating in this study. However, your participation will contribute to future research on how some Nigerian widows cope with the social and cultural challenges that they face as widows. This information can help researchers, counselors, social workers, International Organizations, and Non-Governmental Organizations to better understand the influence of resilience on the health and well-being of widows in Nigeria. It can also shed light on why some of these harmful widowhood practices exist and how they can be overcome through personal strength and resilience. Lastly, this research will help to create further awareness of the plight of widows in Nigeria and possibly Africa.
Voluntary Participation – Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You may choose not to participate at any point. If you decide to participate in this research study, you can change your mind and quit at any time without any penalty.

Confidentiality – Every attempt will be made to see that your personal identity is kept confidential and care will be taken to ensure that any information given during the interview that could identify you is not revealed. Your identity in this study will be protected and you will not be named in the final report. All identifiable information about you will be replaced with a code and a list linking the code and your identifiable information will be securely kept in a secured location. All notes and information will be securely stored in a password-protected file on my computer. Items such as USB drives, signed consent forms, and key codes will be securely locked in a cabinet in my personal possession. While information about you will be handled as confidentially as possible, there is however the possibility of loss of confidentiality. Apart from the principal investigator (Esosa Mohammed), my faculty advisor (Prof. Marie Tedesco) and the East Tennessee State University IRB will also have access to the transcript of your interview. As faculty advisor, Professor Tedesco will keep a copy of your interview transcript in a secure ETSU network drive that only she can access. The audio recording of your interview and any information that can identify you will be destroyed once I have produced a transcript of your interview. After this project is completed, the data from your interview will be kept for six years and will be destroyed thereafter.

By signing below, I confirm that I am between the ages of 18 and 65 years. I have read and understand this consent form, and I have had the opportunity to have them explained to me. I have read and understand the explanation provided to me. I have had all my questions answered to my satisfaction, and by signing below, I volunteer to take part in this study. I have been given a copy of this consent form to sign and return a signed copy to the interviewer via email.

Participant’s Signature ______________________ Date ______________________

Printed Name of Participant _________________ Date ______________________

Interviewer’s Name ______________________ Signature ______________________ Date ______________________

If you would like me to send you a copy of your audio recording, please enter your email address below:

Email ____________________________________________

Contact for Questions
If you have any more questions, please call Esosa Mohammed (Principal Investigator) at 423-5570948 or by email at mohammed@etsu.edu.

For more information, please contact:
Professor Marie Tedesco - Director, Master of Arts in Liberal Studies (Faculty Advisor)
Email - tedescom@etsu.edu
You can call the Chairperson of the ETSU Institutional Review Board at +1 423.439.6054 for any questions you may have about your rights as a part of this research. You can also call a coordinator at the ETSU Institutional Review Board at +1 423.439.6055 or +1 423.439.6002 if you have any questions or concerns about the research and want to talk to someone beside the research team or you can’t reach the study staff.
APPENDIX E: INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT FOR SURVEY PARTICIPANTS

Dear Participant,

My name is Esosa Frances Mohammed and I am a graduate student at East Tennessee State University (ETSU). I am working on a research project in Gender and Diversity. In order to finish my studies, I need to complete a research project and the title of my research study is *Exploring Resilience and Strength in Narratives of Nigerian Widows: An Interdisciplinary Analysis of Coping Mechanisms in Response to Harmful Widowhood Practices in South-West Nigeria*.

The purpose of this research is to discover and understand how Nigerian widows cope with the stress of widowhood practices. From what I have read so far, knowing how some widows deal with the stress from widowhood practices can help other widows cope, develop self-confidence, and teach them how to solve problems. The information you give me will also be useful to other researchers who are interested in this or similar topics. Also, the information you provide in this survey can help social workers and counselors as they work to improve the long-term health and well-being of widows.

I will like to give a brief survey to Nigerian widows between the ages of 18 and 65 using Survey Monkey. It should only take about 3-5 minutes to finish. I advise that you pick a time and place that will allow you to have privacy and little or no disturbance while completing the survey online. You will be asked questions about your life and widowhood experiences. Since this study deals with your experiences as a widow, the risks are that you may feel uncomfortable or emotional because of some of the questions in this survey. However, you may also feel better after you have had the chance to express yourself about your experience as a widow.

This study will not benefit you directly but the information you provide will contribute to future research on why these practices exist and how some Nigerian widows cope with the stress of widowhood practices. Also, the information you provide can make people, not only in Africa but outside of Africa get to know more about what widows in Nigeria are going through.

The last question in this survey will ask if you would like to be interviewed and if you do decide to be interviewed, please type in your contact details in the space provided and I will send you an informed consent form by email. If you do not wish to be interviewed, simply click on no and that will be the end of your part in this research.

Your confidentiality will be protected as best as we can. However, since we are using technology, no guarantees can be made about the interception of data sent over the Internet by any third parties, just like with emails. We will make every effort to make sure that your name is not linked with your answers, except for those who indicate they will like to be interviewed after this survey. Survey Monkey has security features that will be used. For example, your IP address will not be collected, and SSL encryption software will be used. Although your rights and privacy will be protected, the East Tennessee State University (ETSU) Institutional Review Board (IRB) and my faculty supervisor, Professor Marie Tedesco can view the study.
records. The data from your survey will be kept by my supervisor in a secure ETSU network drive that only she can access. After this project is completed, the data from your survey will be kept for six years and will be destroyed thereafter.

Taking part in this study is completely voluntary. You may decide not to take part in this study. You can quit at any time. You may skip any questions you do not want to answer, or you can exit the online survey form if you want to stop completely at any point.

If you have any research-related questions or problems, you may contact me, Esosa Mohammed via email at mohammed@etsu.edu. You can reach my faculty advisor, Professor Marie Tedesco at tedescom@etsu.edu. Also, you may call the chairperson of the IRB at ETSU at (423) 439-6054 if you have questions about your rights as a research subject. If you have any questions or concerns about the research and want to talk to someone who is not with the research team or if you cannot reach the research team, you may call an IRB Coordinator at 423/439-6055 or 423/439-6002.

I appreciate your time and assistance.

Sincerely,

Esosa F. Mohammed

Clicking the AGREE button below indicates

- I have read and understand the information in the consent document.
- I agree to volunteer
- I am at least 18 years old

☐ Agree

☐ Disagree

Please do not forward this email as its survey link is unique to you.
Privacy | Unsubscribe
APPENDIX F: A GRAPHIC REPRESENTATION OF RESEARCH AND RESULTS

- Religious belief and superstition
- Gender Trauma
- Widowhood Practices in Nigeria
- Gender Inequality
- Resilience and Coping Mechanisms
- Faith and Belief in God
- Education and Gainful Employment
- Support from Family and Friends
- Personal Attributes
- Sociological Factors
- Female Agency (Speaking up for herself)
- Empowerment
- Sociocultural Change
- Hard work, Positive Attitude, Focus, Self-Motivation, Determination, Doggedness

(Figure showing relationships between the concepts)
VITA

ESOSA MOHAMMED

Education

M.A. Liberal Arts, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee, 2018

LLM. International Commercial Law, University of Kent, United Kingdom, 2004

Barrister at Law, Nigerian Law School, Lagos State, Nigeria, 2003

Bachelor of Law, University of Benin, Edo State, Nigeria, 2000

Professional Experience

Graduate Assistant, Office of the Dean of Continuing Studies & Academic Outreach, ETSU 2018

Tuition Scholar, Department of Liberal Studies, ETSU 2017


Award

Research Grant, School of Graduate Studies Research Grant program ETSU, April 2018

Committee

Member, Academic Advisor Search Committee 2018

165